

THE
MERCY
OF FATE



BY
THOMAS MCKEAN



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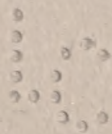
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THE MERCY OF FATE

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By THOMAS McKEAN

Author of "THE MASTER INFLUENCE"



NEW YORK
WESSELS & BISSELL CO.

1910

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October



THE PREMIER PRESS
NEW YORK

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EL 28/9/10
What is life when love is flown ?

*We breathe, indeed, we grieve, we sigh,
And seem to live, and yet we die ;
There is no life alone.*

—Richard Henry Stoddard

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CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING OF IT ALL

A MAN and a maid walked side by side in the dying light of day.

As the dusk fell his arm softly encircled her and, drawing nearer, he caught her to him, kissing her but once. As their lips met, the maiden changed suddenly to a woman.

Both were young, and the springtime of life was in their hearts; and though not a word had been spoken, yet, seeing that he had dared and she had not gainsaid him, it was thus that their troth was plighted.

As time went on love grew stronger, until in one mad moment it overwhelmed the lovers at flood-tide, and after passion had swayed and bent them in sport to its will, like leaves swirling before the storm, the woman wept, while the man whispered a

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fair promise that he would make her his, by the laws of man as well as by the laws of the court of love. And she was comforted.

So it was that he took her forth, and built an humble habitation for her, which he wrought with his own hands. And the hours and days swept by in a dream of sweet drifting, until the man awoke and pondered. Knowing he was poor, he wandered far afield each day in search of work, and each night he returned more and more weary, until as the days passed he became troubled, for he found no employment; and—it was, as he knew only too well, the beginning of the end.

Still he said nothing, hoping that some means of livelihood would be found, and she trusted him because she loved him, confident that all would still be well.

Once more he went away, but this time he did not return until the space of a twelve-month had passed, and it was at their parting that the woman, sad-eyed and weary, clung to him, her heart full of dread, pray-

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ing for strength to tell him of the knowledge that had come to her of a new life within her; but she remained silent; her eyes growing dim as she stood at the door watching his form grow fainter in the gathering gloom. But one sigh escaped her as she realized that she must endure the loneliness of the coming ordeal without the companionship of the man she loved. She would be helpless, save for the presence of a devoted middle-aged woman who had insisted upon accompanying her into exile, and who, she could not help feeling, would soothe, comfort, and perhaps help her to forget.

When at last the man came back to the cabin after his long sojourn, his heart glowing with tender expectation, and the good news trembling on his lips that a small legacy had been left to him by a long-forgotten uncle, whom he had not seen since he was a child, he found the place where they had lived and loved silent and deserted. With despair in his heart, he sought out the old maid, and learned for the first time that

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the woman had died giving birth to a daughter, who survived her.

He could obtain no tidings of the whereabouts of the child, save that she was well, and properly taken care of, so he turned away to face the future with a heavy heart.

Eventually he determined to search for his offspring and (———) of the woman he had loved, and who, though guilty in the eyes of the world, had loved him and even died for his sake, so that she seemed to him to be more sinned against than sinning. But first he must earn enough to support the young life that his conscience made him responsible for, and he traveled far in search of gold, digging deep into and watering mother-earth with his tears, praying that she might bring forth for him her increase.

CHAPTER II

STEPHEN RETURNS

STEPHEN MARLOWE was returning to New York after an absence of nineteen years, a rich man. With the few thousands inherited from an uncle, he had started for the Klondike, and, after years of suffering, hardship, and several escapes from death, he had weathered disappointments, privations, and general hard luck, until he had without warning "struck it rich," at the very moment when his fortunes were at their lowest ebb.

As he cast a reflective eye at the fast-flying landscape, the soft whirring of the wheels, the rapid motion of the train, combined with the equally quick movement which his eyes made as he sought to fix his attention on the passing objects, produced a species of auto-hypnotism, so that he unconsciously dwelt on the sequence of events that

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had taken place since his long absence from his adopted town.

Born in a remote little village of Connecticut, he had at the age of eighteen become dissatisfied with the limitations of his life in such a small center of activity, and its narrowness caused him to realize the necessity for a change.

The reasons which brought this decision to a head were many, but the one which first set the idea tingling in his mind was the death of his mother. The result of her untimely end added to the difficulties of a situation which her presence alone had rendered bearable.

His mother, who had also been his friend, had always stood out with great clearness as the principal figure on his childish horizon.

When he was five years old his parents had quarreled, and in the curious situation which followed it was he who acted as go-between; for, after the breach, which was never healed until the day she died, these two lived silently in the same house, never holding any communication with each other,

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except through him. This small creature learned instinctively by his natural gift of tact to perform his delicate duty without friction, and was so far successful that he became from the beginning acceptable to both.

His comings and goings were never questioned, for he came when he was needed, and when he saw that either of his parents wished to be alone, he went about his childish business carelessly and light-heartedly.

His faith in his mother was unbounded; it seemed somehow to have been born in him; and if she accepted the situation without question, he certainly did not feel it incumbent upon him to inquire into, to criticise, or even to seek her reasons for such a course of action.

At first the lad made an effort to keep up allegiance to his father, but, as the reconciliation at the deathbed had been merely perfunctory, he found after a few days that to pursue it was almost an impossibility. Gradually, the motive being removed, Stephen felt it more and more irksome to visit

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the father he now cordially hated, for his mother's death had opened his eyes, and he tried to think of an escape from his unhappiness.

He had always been of a saving and frugal disposition, and now he worked with feverish energy to lay aside enough money to go away. Only a few days ago he had received a letter from a friend of the same age as himself, who, writing from New York, begged him to come and join him. Perhaps this was the reason which in the end hastened Stephen's departure.

The struggle for existence in the city followed, and young Marlowe often found it hard to continue what seemed to be an eternal hand-to-mouth fight for bare subsistence. The journey to New York took almost all his carefully hoarded cash, but, as he told his chum with a feeble assumption of gaiety, "all them millionaires come to the city without a cent, just like me, and now—look at 'em!"

Then came days of partial starvation, spent in ceaseless tramping about the streets.

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He often sold papers or matches, ran errands, and carried bags, then, worn out, passed the night in restless tossing.

By dint of perseverance, however, he conquered fate sufficiently to save enough money to warrant taking a holiday, though the truth was that, deep down in the bottom of his heart, a feeling of compunction existed which made him think it his duty to go home and make his peace; for, after all, though he did not feel any sympathy with him, the man was his father, and the implied duty still existed.

His sacrifice was rewarded, for no word of blame spoiled the peace of his home-coming. He renewed his former relations with his father, and nursed him through an illness, finally receiving a blessing, as the old man died from a sudden stroke of paralysis.

When Stephen reached this point in his reflections, a look of yearning softened his rugged features, followed by a wistful prayer, breathed from the heart, and, if the words had been spoken instead of felt, they

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might have been embodied in the words of Tennyson:

“But O for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!”

As he thought of the mother of his child, his heart was full of a vague regret, for he had always felt that his beloved Linda, if she had lived, would have been unselfish enough to have forgiven him for the wrong done her; but, even if his sin had been too heinous for her to show mercy to him, he felt that he had already suffered enough.

Now he was going in search of the child, which had been left to him, while the woman had been paid in full, for the wages of sin is death.

He turned round and leaned his head wearily against the back of his chair, his eyes closed. He was very tired, and the task he had set himself would never be finished. It would be almost an impossibility to find the child, for how would he recognize her, she whom he had never seen? This was to be his punishment, then! To seek and never find!

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As the train approached the city Marlowe looked out of the window with increasing interest. How unlike it all was from what he remembered! But then he had carried in his mind's eye the New York of twenty years ago! And the network of elevated roads! Yes, it was to be his home again, at least for the present. How different it would be from the struggles of the old days, so long ago! How he would revel in the luxuries that he could not afford before, and how he should sip the pleasures which in those other days had been denied to him!

He smiled somewhat wistfully, for life had been full of bitterness for him, of groping in dark places.

His mind reverted to his present plans, and for the next few minutes he occupied himself trying to decide to what hotel he would go.

New York at last! In a few minutes the train would come to a stop. Marlowe's spirits were rising, the past was becoming dim and shadowy, while the present loomed

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forth big and slightly overwhelming, but full of promise.

The porter offered to take his bag and carry it out to the platform for him, but Stephen resisted and held on to it, remarking facetiously that "to-morrow's baking day, and I got my dough in there;" so he picked it up, and placed it on his knees. As he did so, the train glided into the shed.

Stephen Marlowe was a tall man with a kindly though rather suspicious pair of black eyes, and although he moved easily and with a certain grace, his figure was somewhat gaunt, possessing that very leanness which betokens great endurance and strength. As a matter of fact, he was always in perfect health. His firm will had enabled him to pass through many hardships, and his fresh though rugged skin told plainly enough that his life had not been an easy one. He was not accustomed to lie on beds of roses, though he was determined to try the effect of something resembling one soon, for he felt the need of a good rest,

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having just completed an unbroken journey of five days.

With his dark suit, dark overcoat, his loosely rolled umbrella, his stout gloves, his soft black hat pushed back from his forehead, and carrying his precious black bag, he made a picturesque figure walking along among the crowd of passengers, porters, and others who thronged the narrow arrival platform of the Grand Central Station in New York.

The bustle and confusion did not seem to annoy him; indeed, he did not appear aware of it, for with quiet insistence he pushed his way on, and, hailing the first hansom he saw, stepped into it, directing the driver to take him to a world-famed hotel, where he had been told he could get the best for his money.

A new life appeared to be opening alluringly before him, and he smiled broadly as the conveyance lurched on its perilous way along 42nd Street. He drew several deep breaths as the cab bowled on, his expressive eyes showing approval as the driver

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drove on one wheel around cable cars, or avoided by a hair's-breadth what seemed like an almost inevitable collision with other cabs, dray teams, or foot passengers, the latter crossing the street under the very feet of prancing horses, which were often driven recklessly through the crowded thoroughfare.

It was splendid, it was wonderful, and the whole scene suddenly appealed to the new feeling of freedom which he had unconsciously assumed.

A new sense of elation possessed him. He was excited though outwardly calm, and all at once he made up his mind to become an important atom in the life of this great roaring city. He would learn from it and absorb the essence of its life.

He was to be one of the many thousands in it, and his mind teemed with many plans for its conquest.

So engrossed was Stephen when the driver drew up at the hotel, that he glanced inquiringly at the liveried porter who stood there to help him alight.

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With a curious glance, half of timidity, and half of wonder, he surveyed the man, then, with a laugh he jumped from the cab and paid the driver. He entered the building and found himself directly in the hall.

He looked about him leisurely, saw the dining-room on his right, with its tiny tables, its immaculate service of napery and plate, and somehow felt that he did not belong here. He felt out of place, but squared his shoulders and turned sharply to the left in response to a softly murmured direction that the desk was just beside him.

What if he could not get a room! What if they would refuse him on account of his clothes! Well, they were the best that could be bought in Seattle, and it was nobody's business how much they had cost. By dint of will, he conquered a momentary embarrassment, and listened attentively to the conversation of a gentleman who was just ahead of him; but as his period of waiting drew to a close he grew more and more nervous. He stood there feeling very much like a schoolboy who was patiently awaiting

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a predestined summons to appear before the headmaster of his school. He had no means of knowing why he had been sent for, nor what was expected of him, only that he was becoming very uncomfortable, and longed for the ordeal to be over. His increasing nervousness made it almost impossible for him to hear what the other man was saying. The conversation seemed interminable, and Stephen began to fidget and shuffle his feet. He turned away his head and almost encountered the eye of the servant, who was standing near his bag, ready at any moment to take it and its owner to one of the floors above, and he frowned angrily, for he fancied he detected a look of amusement on the man's face.

Almost before he knew it, he had been assigned to a room, and he and his modest belongings were shot up in the elevator.

The room was in his opinion very beautiful, and indeed was in excellent taste. He walked across it and looked out of the window, then moved mechanically into the bath-

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room. He had not remembered asking for such a luxury, but here it was, so let it stay. He uttered the last few words aloud as he turned to re-enter the room again, and the boy who had waited to see whether the room would suit, thinking the words were addressed to him and that the gentleman was satisfied, carried the bag over to a table, where he deposited it. Stephen wondered why the lad did not go, as he stood by the door for a few minutes in the attitude of one trying to remember something; he wished he would, for he was beginning to make him feel uncomfortable. Stephen was just about to open his lips and ask him what the great snakes he was waiting there for, looking like an ape, when the boy, apparently divining that nothing was coming his way in the shape of a tip, turned the handle of the door with the remark that he would send the "valley." This observation Marlowe did not of course understand, but as soon as the door was closed he sat down on the sofa, pushed his hat still farther back on his head, and, resting his chin in the palms of his

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hands, gave himself up to gloomy reflections.

His former buoyant mood had been like a house of cards, and now it was going to fall down. It was all his own fault—he had no business to come to this hotel, for he was only a plain man and felt he was out of his depth; besides, it was intensely disagreeable to feel that he was being continually laughed at.

The truth was that Stephen Marlowe was a very fair imitation of a gentleman at heart, or else he would not have felt the least necessity for making any reparation to the little being for whose advent into the world he had been responsible. Clearly it must be his business to seek, and, when he had found the child, to do all in his power to make her life happy. If she were in want or distress, he could luckily relieve that, for he had more money than he knew what to do with. What could not money do, if only he had the benefit of some one else's experience! But whose?

As if in answer to his thought the door

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opened after a gentle knock and the valet entered.

Stephen rose, and faced about with an expression which might indicate that he was on the brink of a decision.

“Say!” he drawled, “get me something to eat up here, and get it quick. I’m about petered out.”

“I’ll send the floor waiter, sir!”

“Good!” replied Marlowe, rubbing his hands; and then, as if struck by a sudden idea, “and—see here, do you want to talk business with me, now? I’m only a kid though I’m over forty, and I need a mother’s helper.”

The bewildered servant bowed.

After a few minutes’ talk, during which the Englishman strove to make out the full meaning of the other’s words, he sufficiently recovered himself to realize that he had agreed to enter the service of Mr. Stephen Marlowe as his valet for the handsome compensation of eighty dollars a month, and everything found.

Jenkins found his new master a study,

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for he used a strange language, though little by little he began to comprehend that he was being given a short account of his master's life during his long absence from New York.

There was a good deal that was quaintly simple about this man, he thought, who spoke of his experiences, almost as a child would. Jenkins smiled sympathetically as he followed the other's narrative with growing comprehension, and he felt that he might become attached to Marlowe as time passed.

Stephen had reached the point in his story where his father's death and the subsequent sale of the old home had brought him back to a new starting-point in his career. He said that he was completely stunned to find that all the cash had gone to pay debts of which he was ignorant, and was overcome at first because he had not enough money to take him back to the city he had grown to love. He said as New York had become his home he had been disappointed not to be able to go back there, but it was foolish to cry over spilled milk, and much better to sit up and grin as if one liked it. As this ap-

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peared to be a question, Jenkins bowed and thanked his employer, who continued to speak with astounding volubility. Just as his thoughts, he said, had begun to crowd in on him and make him nearly crazy, a letter had brought him the welcome and surprising news that some old uncle had died and left him three thousand dollars. After remarking that this piece of luck had almost made him feel as if he were going to have an attack of brain fever, he went on to say he had tried to come to some conclusion as to how he should dispose of the money. He told Jenkins that for a moment he was tempted to blow it all in, as the one person he could have helped had died. Suddenly he paused in indecision and then continued, "Go to the Waldorf and live on champagne for a week;" and here he became so involved that the servant could not get a clear idea of what he was talking about. There was some one else he had to find who might be glad to see some of his money, only he decided he had to make a lot before it would be of any use, and that was why he had gone out West

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in search of gold. He was glad now he had done so.

What it was that had held him back from blurting out the whole of his history to his newly acquired servant, he could not say. He was anxious to tell him all and ask his advice, but somehow the words stuck in his throat, and he could not go on. Perhaps later on, when he knew the man better——well, he would see!

“And now, young man,” he said in conclusion, “that’s all, except to hustle along that grub.”

“The waiter, sir——” began Jenkins anxiously.

“Git!” said Marlowe quietly, but with a certain amount of force, and the servant fled from the room.

Reinforced by an excellent dinner, and further strengthened by a good cigar, Stephen resisted the temptation to go out and see New York that night. As he told his servant, who gravely agreed with him, “it doesn’t do any good to burn the candle at

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both ends, and there is plenty of time yet for a good time."

Marlowe dismissed Jenkins, refusing his offers of help, saying that he was a plain man and used to taking care of himself. The servant bowed, and, going out, closed the door as his master removed his boots, so that he was spared the unutterable sight of seeing Stephen pop into the bed with most of his clothes on, a habit he had formed in the Klondike, where manners are not, and men eat and are merry when the rations are abundant, for they know not what the morrow may bring forth.

CHAPTER III

JENKINS SUGGESTS

STEPHEN awoke next morning on the stroke of six. This was one of the habits formed during the years of his active life of hard work, when the guarding of his own and his partner's claim was often divided, on the one hand, between watchfulness, which meant a night made up of two-hour (or more) periods of sitting at the door of one's tent on the look-out for those who would jump another's claim, or steal gold from it, and snatches of sleep at odd moments, on the other. His last hour of rest had always ended at six, and so accustomed had he become to this habit of early rising that Hank Fuller, his partner, invariably found him already awake and sitting up in his cot when he came in to call him and tell him it was his turn to go on sentry duty.

Marlowe, only half awake as yet, and

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still slightly confused, raised himself on his elbow and peered out into the room. A gray light filtered through the thin curtains, and indistinctly he could make out the various objects with which he was as yet scarcely familiar.

He sat up in bed and yawned. Turning on the electric light at the side of his bed, he saw, by looking at his watch that it was five minutes past six o'clock. With a quick gesture he threw back the bedclothes and sat on the edge of the bed, looking toward the window.

Then he walked to the fireplace, and, noticing that the fire was already laid, struck a match, and, stooping, lit it, for the morning was cold.

A strange figure he made crouching there before the dancing blaze which struggled feebly to spring into life, for he was wearing a pair of thick woolen socks, his stout woolen gray underwear, his linen shirt, and a blanket, caught up in passing from the bed, to throw about his shoulders, while his hair, tangled and unbrushed, gave him an

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uncouth and curiously grotesque appearance.

The fire caught more and more completely, and threw his figure against the now rosy ceiling in wavering shapes, as the crackling flames leaped higher.

Like these flames, Marlowe's thoughts soared in flights of imagination, and one plan after another formed in his mind like a beautiful bubble, only to break like it and become nothing. More bubbles fell and were shattered until again, like the flames which were slowly dying, his spirits sank and his senses were dulled as the ashes of a dead past settled around his heart.

Had not his punishment begun from the hour of Linda's death? he asked himself in bitterness of spirit; and when would it end?

As he looked dreamily at the fire, which had now come back to life, his thoughts wandered more and more from the present, until he began to weave pictures that had but small connection with the management of his personal affairs. After a time his powers of volition weakened, until he

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seemed to have no control over the visions he saw in the fire; nor did he wish to exercise any restraint over them, for it was too pleasant to drift and let the future take care of itself. Dream after dream assailed his waking eye, until he did not try to distinguish the real from the unreal. It was as if he were on the crest of some compelling current, which drew him he knew not where, soul asleep and without any desire or power to resist its subtle fascination.

Some of the fancies woven for him were familiar, and he smiled at them as if old friends were near; but others, apparently chosen at random, impressed themselves more strongly upon his memory. These worked in more intricately with his thoughts, until the last one, a woman's face, lingered and looked enigmatically at him. In vain he breathed an appealing question as she glanced at him, but though her lips opened, no sound came to him.

Seven o'clock was striking, and Stephen started. He decided to dress without delay, get his breakfast, then proceed with the

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business of the day, in this case to get his money safely deposited in some reliable bank, see a lawyer and broker in regard to making some investments, and then have a look around town.

The sudden thought which came to him was that he could pick up some quiet points from his servant, and that a careful study of the man, or the asking of his advice without appearing to do so, would be a step in the right direction. Almost coincident with this decision came a knock at the door, and in answer to his permission to enter, the slender figure of Jenkins appeared in the doorway, crossed the room, and went into the bathroom.

The vision still haunted him, and he could not understand it, for the face he had seen poised in the heart of the fire, with its lurid aureole of flames, and wearing an expression which might indicate a shade of reproach or of pleading, seemed somehow unsatisfied.

He walked back and sat down on his bed utterly perplexed. What did the reproach-

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ful expression mean, and why was the glance of the lovely eyes enigmatical?

“Your bath is quite ready, sir.”

Stephen stared, then started up at once and stepped into the bathroom. He had a sensation of being taken care of, which was certainly not unpleasant; indeed, it was quite the reverse, it was luxurious, and he wondered whether he should ever become accustomed to it.

Contrasted with the present, there had been a great many discomforts in those other days of which he had hardly been aware, for they all had been too much a part of the day's work to make much impression on him; besides, he had not had time to think of them then, and certainly not much leisure in which to differentiate. Those days had been too ugly, too full of hard work to do anything at the end of them but fling himself upon his cot and sink, almost immediately, into the sleep of utter exhaustion.

That was it, he had never had time before to know that there was any other way of living; but now, as he looked about the

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luxurious bathroom, he was conscious of a great contrast, and that here creature comforts were at hand.

He knew it was only a question of time before he would become used to this complicated scheme of dressing, and the totally different point of view in regard to life in general which he was trying to adopt; still, in the end he would be willing to accept it all as natural just as other men did, and, moreover, demanded; and these other men were not a whit better than he was.

He looked about him again with increasing satisfaction. Just to think of such a bath in the old days.

Stephen Marlowe was unconsciously making the distinction between luxuries and necessities, and this process was to go on, developing more and more as his scheme of life unfolded.

From his earliest days this man, who had been for so many years conversant with the seamy side of life—the ordinary life of the real workaday world—had been shrewd, observant, and adaptive, so when he returned

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to his bedroom and saw the order which had been brought out of chaos by his servant, he dared not oppose, but submitted and, literally, did what was expected of him. To be sure, there was a good deal of excitement in this new way of living, and its very novelty appealed to him. The truth was that Stephen stood somewhat in awe of this quiet man who served him so unobtrusively and well; and the servant, for his part, found his work distinctly not devoid of interest.

Already Jenkins had taken his new master in hand, seeing possibilities of smoothing down the rough edges and refining the crudities of a nature that was replete with promises of better things.

Accustomed to the moods of those he had served, he was able to gauge Marlowe's measure with considerable accuracy, and assured himself that the task of polishing up this rough diamond would be a profitable and mutually useful one. He had made a good start in securing such wonderful wages, but, to do the man justice, he was not governed

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solely by sordid consideration; in fact, he was not more venial than the general run of such men.

It will be seen that Jenkins, although a servant, was ambitious, and had made up his mind, which was no light thing with him, that if there were anything worth developing in his master, he should like to be the one to do it; from which it may be seen that the valet was astute enough to think well of Mr. Stephen Marlowe, and was willing, so to speak, to take him on faith.

Stephen admired the neatness with which his shaving articles had been laid out, and with difficulty repressed a smile as he saw his clothes hanging in order over a chair, with his now polished boots placed conveniently near; and somehow it was all very pleasant and easy, he thought as he dressed. After he had had his breakfast and was ready to go out, he turned to his servant and said:

“I guess I’m shy on a lot of stuff. You’d best give me a few daily hints on what I

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should get in the way of clothes, and so forth."

Jenkins smiled and bowed.

"There are a good many things you would be needing," he responded deprecatingly, "and your wardrobe is hardly—I mean it needs replenishing—from top to bottom, as the saying is—begging your pardon, sir."

"You're the doctor," was the surprising reply; "and now I'll go out."

Somehow he forgot to say that he had just fitted himself out anew the week before, for at this moment Jenkins opened the door after handing his master his gloves, hat, and umbrella, and he felt that it did not matter much, which all goes to prove that the rough diamond was taking kindly to the process of polishing.

"I'll see to all that you require, sir," he said deferentially; "and," added Jenkins wistfully, "might I suggest, sir, that you see the manager about me—?"

"Cert," answered Marlowe, not noticing the faint tone of anxiety in the other's voice, and preparing to leave the room;

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“but why not get your hat and come along too? It’s so much more sociable.”

The servant coughed discreetly, but followed his master out of the room.

The matter at the desk was soon satisfactorily at an end, so it was that Jenkins officially entered Marlowe’s service.

The cleverness of the man-servant soon became apparent, for he anticipated his master’s wishes, taking him to a tailor, a hatter, a haberdasher, and a bootmaker. Almost before he realized it, he found himself the owner of two trunks, a dressing-case, a cane, and umbrella, and a mackintosh; then the valet’s immediate duties were over.

Stephen was astounded at the celerity with which the business was managed, but there was one thing he was not aware of, and that was that Jenkins, by apparently deferring to him, had practically ordered everything himself. The question of credit was never broached, and although the servant was allowed to carry the famous black bag, he never had to say more than that

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Mr. Marlowe was very rich and mention the hotel at which he was stopping; of course, this information was breathed into the private ears of the various managers of the firms they visited, and was, as it was meant to be, confidential.

It was like magic, thought Marlowe, and when Jenkins had apologetically suggested a more elaborate suite of rooms at the hotel, he did not think of any objection to offer.

It must not be thought that Jenkins was trying to establish a dominion over his master, nor that Stephen was coming under the influence of his servant, but it was rather as if he were seeking to find himself, and that it was easier and less confusing not to argue, but to go where the other pointed. The way was a trifle perplexing to him just because it was unfamiliar, that was all. Once he had found his level he would assert himself, and he meant to do so at the proper time.

“I want to go to a bank—.”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Hamilton, who was at the hotel a few days before you came, sir,

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used to go to a bank near Broadway. And Jenkins mentioned the name of a firm of long-established probity, whose banking house was situated in a small street near that highway.

"I ought to have a lawyer and, I suppose, a broker—," added Stephen.

"Quite so, sir," continued the servant; "I was coming to them, and," he went on, as if it were an afterthought, "I'll take you there now. Begin with the solicitor, sir. You'll have time to do the three before lunch. It's just gone eleven."

"Yes," drawled Stephen, for it began to dawn on him that Jenkins was offering too many suggestions all at once. "We'll get to that later. Just give me the addresses, and meet me in half an hour at—," and he hesitated.

"At the Courtlandt Street entrance to the Elevated?" inquired Jenkins suggestively.

"Yes," again agreed Marlowe in his drawling voice. "Yes," he repeated more decidedly this time, "that'll do as well as any other place, I guess."

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“If you are detained, am I to wait for you—?”

Marlowe gave the man a look, which meant that he was not to ask so many questions; then he took the bag from him and, turning, walked down the street with his great long swinging stride, and his face full of suspicion. The thought came to him, quite out of a clear sky, that perhaps Jenkins was a little too shrewd; could he be attempting to get the better of him?

His business at last finished, he retraced his steps and met Jenkins at the appointed place. One glance at the man's face convinced him that he had been unjust in his suspicions, for it bore the unmistakable stamp of honesty; but still it would do no harm to go a little slow with him until he had an opportunity of testing him.

“Just half-past twelve o'clock, sir.”

“So it seems, young man,” he answered, looking at him sharply; and then, realizing the absurdity of the situation, he added; “and time for lunch. Say! I'm hungry. Suppose—.”

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“I have a few little commissions to do,” anticipated Jenkins quickly, for he feared his master had intended to invite him to lunch. “I’ll be at the hotel later, say after four o’clock, sir; kindly ring for me when you require my services.”

Marlowe regarded the retreating back of his servant, and wondered if the man was straight after all, or had he himself made some stupid blunder? Which was it? He would keep his eyes open, and this beauty, this would-be-slick servant of his, if he really were so, should find that he, Marlowe, was no blamed greenhorn from the West—no, sirree! And he swung round, squaring his shoulders, walking quickly down the street looking for a restaurant where he could eat his lunch.

CHAPTER IV

LOUISA'S AMBITION GRATIFIED

IF Louisa Collins had not turned her head after she had fitted the latchkey into the door of the house in 74th Street, where she and Mary Bannerman had two tiny rooms, she would not have looked into the eyes of Charles K. Biester. This in itself was a small thing to do, but if she had not done so, she would not have been engaged to play a small part in the coming production of an elaborate extravaganza, entitled "*The Fireflies*."

To continue, if she had not—but one must not tell the end of the story before writing the introduction.

A brief account of Louisa's history is necessary, if only to explain how it was that she and Miss Bannerman came to be living together in West 74th Street.

In that year, Louisa, the only daughter of Isaac and Margaret Collins, sustained a

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double shock. Her father, who had been the manager of an insurance company, absconded without the slightest warning of suspicion, taking with him to Canada a large amount of money belonging to the company. The sudden news of this defalcation and disgrace caused her mother's death.

It was a merciful providence which decreed that Margaret Collins should close her eyes forever before the further news of her husband's suicide was made public. Louisa, after she had recovered herself and found that she possessed just five dollars and sixty-three cents all told, made up her mind to go out into the world and make her living.

Then followed days of disappointment, till, she met, by the merest chance, her old schoolmate, Mary Bannerman, who was employed as a saleswoman in one of the large department stores. Mary, touched by the condition to which privation and poverty had brought her old friend, took pity on her, and promised to interest herself in her be-

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half. In the meantime she insisted upon taking her to her room for the night, saying she would willingly provide for her, until she could take care of herself.

Stimulated by the good cheer and warmth, Louisa poured her pitiful story into the sympathetic ear of Miss Bannerman.

It was Mary who arranged for the sale of the furniture in the Collins house, and out of the proceeds of the sale bought Louisa a warm jacket and engaged a room for her next to her own. In addition to these services, it was she, who, in the course of a few days, induced the manager to give Louisa the place which was then vacant and next to hers at the ribbon counter. For the moment, Louisa appreciated the kind heart of this splendid warm-hearted young woman, and she thought it a wise thing to put her best foot forward in order to weld this friendship, in case she should need it later on.

It was arranged that expenses between them should be shared, Mary being the

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treasurer. Indeed, she managed so well, that a weekly visit to some theatre was their reward.

Louisa's life had indeed changed, for she depended on Mary for everything. Mary chose her pleasures, innocent though they were, and took charge of her almost as a mother would have done.

Miss Bannerman was an educated girl, of more humble origin than Louisa, but with an ambition to achieve something worth while. She could see at a glance that Louisa could never be satisfied for long with her present prosaic existence, but for the sake of their old family friendship, Mary, in the kindness of her heart, would do for her what she could. Her friend's future must take care of itself. Certainly, she had been thoroughly unselfish when she had taken Louisa under her wing.

Louisa was thoroughly dissatisfied with her present mode of life, because she had been accustomed to refined surroundings, and, until her mother's death, she had been an absolute nonentity, devoting no time to

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her own betterment, nor giving a thought to another's.

She was most unhappy in being forced to live out of her sphere. Naturally, it was crude and unsatisfying. Mary, and her co-workers, on the other hand, were happy and content, for they were living in their natural element, unhampered by the smug thought that they had even time to look down upon others. These hard working girls were looking toward better things. They were working toward a goal they would reach in time, but they had sense enough to know that time alone would be their reward—for time alone, with study, spell culture and position.

Louisa took care to conceal her principal characteristics. These were love of excitement, a constant desire for change, and a temperament that was naturally indolent, unless aroused by some absorbing interest.

Having been snatched from actual poverty, she quickly recovered her natural condition, and became the free, careless girl she always had been. Had she been less

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nervously constituted, she would have accepted the present with equanimity, and a feeling of gratitude, but she could not.

In her heart she knew what she wanted, but she took a morbid pleasure in deceiving herself as to her real ambition. She wanted to believe that she was a disconsolate being, so that later on, as she thought, some manager would give her a place in his company; she could then hug her ambition of one day becoming a great actress to her heart: and Louisa firmly believed that soon she would become a great actress, and being ungrateful vowed to overcome every obstacle in her path, in order to achieve her ambition.

Mary loved her work, and when she returned after a busy and especially successful day to her humble home, with a smile on her face at the slight profit she had been able to make, she felt like marking that day with a white stone. Mary had another interest, however, which was destined to estrange her all the more from Louisa. She had fallen in love with James Garner, and

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so little absorbed and unselfish did love make her, that, noticing Louisa's abstraction, she suggested a visit to the theatre and carried it out, the party consisting of one other young man, a friend of Jim's, to make up the fourth.

It was to be Jim's treat with a supper to follow at a popular café, and, by the alacrity with which Louisa accepted the invitation, and the pleased expression Mary saw light up her friend's face, she felt that she had hit on just the plan to cheer up the girl, but if she had only known it, these visits to the theatre were luring her charge onward to what was fast becoming an obsession; for Louisa's love for the stage as a diversion from the dreadful monotony of her usual life of toil, was fast becoming an absolute necessity to her existence.

The smell of the theatre was in her nostrils, the glare of the footlights shone figuratively in her eyes, so that her perspective, narrow at first, broadened out in fancy as she imagined herself part and parcel of the stage and its life.

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The party should have been a success, for the house was a brilliant one—people of distinction, of wealth, or others famous for some cherished eccentricity, being present in the boxes, all of whom were being pointed out by Jim with just the proper amount of the true republican spirit before the curtain rose. But somehow this little group of four was evidently not congenial, for Mary was absorbed in her lover, seeing the play only through his eyes; while the young man, finding Louisa strangely quiet and more repressed as the play proceeded, voted the show a poor one and began to wonder why he had come.

What did she mean to imply by her attitude? Had he been guilty of any rudeness to her? He could remember none. Harry Vantine was well known for his courtesy to women, and, when the two girls had joined Jim and himself, it was natural for Mary and Jim to move on ahead, while he had respectfully taken Louisa's arm, and, matching his steps to hers, followed the others.

Harry looked furtively at Louisa and

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noted that as she, half turned away from him, regarded the stage with eyes wide open and intent, she was totally absorbed by it all and oblivious to her surroundings. He thought her eyes were beautiful, and he was considered a connoisseur in such matters; but how the pupils had grown, and how the eyes themselves shone and glittered. He was not quite certain whether he liked that or not. Her hair, too, naturally wavy and black, was surmounted by a simple black hat with white feathers, and her dress and jacket, both in excellent taste, yet had an air of distinction about them not often seen in girls of her class, and he wondered. Indeed, such elegance was rarely observed by him outside of the Coats and Wraps, in which department he was employed as second assistant manager. On the whole, she was the swellest thing he had seen for a long time, always excepting the models in the daily hints from Paris, with which he was expected to familiarize himself once a week; but somehow she was rather like those women with their inane expressions, their

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long willowy figures, except that she was quite different in some subtle, fascinating way, and it was quite evident that she did not belong naturally to his set. However, that did not explain her manner to him. What on earth had happened to make her so cold and distant? If she was too proud and stuckup for them—and he looked affectionately at the other couple who were happily billing and cooing, paying not the slightest attention to the play—why, she had better not have come.

She would only answer him in monosyllables, and these grew colder and more detached as the evening proceeded, until Vantine was not sorry when the curtain fell at the end of the last act.

Harry was grieved to think Louisa failed to appreciate his efforts in giving her, as he thought, a most enjoyable evening. Why, she ought to be with those monkeys in the boxes, instead of up here in the gallery. She should treat a fellow trying his level best to be nice to her, as if she liked it, instead of making him feel like this.

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In an instant, however, all was changed. To Harry's surprise, Louisa did not offer any resistance to the pressure of his arm upon hers, but turned at once to him quite confidingly, as he thought, and apologized for her absorption.

"Wasn't Mabelle String wonderful in the second act?" she inquired gaily.

"She was entirely perfect," was the studied reply, though he determined to pocket his pride and play up to her if she gave him half a chance.

"Just to think of the applause she got," murmured Louisa dreamily. "I wonder how she felt——"

"Oh, she's the whole show," broke in Vantine quickly; "but I guess she's used to it by now. You see she's been on the stage for a long time, and she's the girl that knows the ropes and can pull the wires, too. She ain't no chicken, though. Why, they say she's likely to be a way past thirty, and that's getting on for an actress, you know."

"I wish I knew her," exclaimed Miss Collins, passionately.

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"I understand," chimed in Vantine, as if he understood completely; "and say, I often feel stagey when I strike the concrete after a strong show like that. I know how you feel. Lou don't want to agree nor disagree with no one, and you don't know your own mind for two minutes running. All the people you see, too, seem just—dead common. Ah, I know the feeling well. I had it bad the night I 'suped' at the Italian opera, three weeks ago come Tuesday. Say, for a few minutes I thought I was right in it, but the boys soon put me on that I was the false alarm." And Vantine sighed in what he considered his most killingly effective manner.

At supper Louisa was the gayest of the gay, and gave imitations which were very clever, and original, too, of the people they had seen on the stage that evening; but it was Mary alone who noticed that the girl was possessed by a strange excitement. The wine, however, instead of going to Louisa's head, steadied her and gave her strength to resist the temptation to blurt

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out that she was wretchedly tired of going to the "store," and to tell them all how she longed to go on the stage. But as she had practically no money and no influence, she must take what present comfort she could out of her dream, and be silent. She made a vow, however, that whatever spare cash she could save, she would spend in going to the play. If she did not get a new dress she might manage to go every night. It would be glorious; and the theatre would be nearer to her so that she would feel herself growing, as it were, more and more a part of it all.

The party broke up and walked together to the subway, where they separated.

"You enjoyed your outing, didn't you?" asked Mary solicitously; "but I hope there won't be a reaction."

"Reaction?" echoed Louisa scornfully; "why, what do you mean? I was perfectly happy, and—there shall be no reaction."

How little did she realize that she was only deceiving herself. After all, there must always be a reaction, especially after

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the crisis has been passed; and Louisa was unconsciously approaching the point where the supporting dam would give way, and in the end she would be precipitated down the flaming stream that leads to destruction.

There was to be a complete change of scene, as she arranged during the interval of her day-dream, and life was to be lived on broader principles; this new existence was to contain a great deal of luxury, of which jewels and dress formed a not inconspicuous part. But to obtain this she must make herself known, and what better field than the stage to display herself, her jewels, her costumes, and her charms. But where was the money to come from to carry out this complicated scheme? Alas, she did not know.

In the days that followed, her life ran along even grooves, and without friction, but at night she crept away to some theatre and, as she watched the spectacle, she dreamed dreams and lived in a world of her own making. Mary played an important role in these reveries, which were conceived

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during the progress of the play, and came to fulness as she went home later on; for had it not been she who primarily had made even this pleasure possible?

Late one evening in November Biester, the well-known theatrical manager, was passing along 74th Street. As he came near to the house where Louisa was fitting her latchkey into the lock, he paused, and she looked up, so that the light of the street lamp just opposite shone full on her face.

Biester raised his hat in a tentative manner, as if fearing he had made a mistake.

"I beg your pardon, but isn't this Mrs. —Adams—?"

"No, I am Miss Louisa Collins," was the answer; "what do you want?"

Biester bowed, and murmured something about a stupid mistake as he moved away; but when the door was closed behind Louisa he returned, and, noting the number of the house, walked away, more briskly, this time, and he smiled.

He had first seen Mrs. Collins at the *Café Martin* on the evening she had sup-

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ped with Jim, Mary, and Harry. Then he had been struck by her beauty and had determined to seek her out, for he was looking for just such a type as hers to do a turn in his new vaudeville production. He had sought for her in vain, and despairing of finding her until to-night as he was leaving the theatre he came upon her and deliberately followed her home. Now, by a ruse, he knew her name and address, and both had been carefully entered in his private notebook.

Louisa was entering upon the second phase of her crisis, for on the night that he had first seen her, another man, who had been supping with Biester, saw her, too, and he it was who had in the first instance pointed her out to Biester. His name was not to be disclosed for the present as he was the mysterious backer of the show, who had made one of the conditions of his promised aid that his name should not appear, and the great manager, accustomed to the whims of very rich men, had laughingly acquiesced.

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“Don’t see what you’re up to, Steve,” for this was the boy friend who had induced Marlowe to come to New York for the first time so many years ago, “but it’s a go just the same.”

Next morning Louisa received a note from Biester, and when she glanced at the official paper of the manager she laughed. So she went out, excited, to be sure, with a new light shining in her eyes, but with a latent feeling of nervousness beginning to clutch at her heart.

When she reached the door of Biester’s office, she took several deep breaths before knocking. A gruff voice bade her enter, and she went in.

CHAPTER V

THE STAGE-MANAGER AND THE ACTRESS

LOUISA'S first impression on entering the room was one of complete bewilderment. The room itself was filled with tobacco smoke, which made it difficult to see what it looked like; a piano was being played gaily and almost recklessly, which added to the general confusion; a typewriting machine was being banged somewhere in the middle distance; while a fat man, with red hair through which he ran his fingers from time to time, walked rapidly up and down shouting out orders in a sharp, raucous voice; and the walls being papered with flaming wallpaper, with here and there a brilliant poster, all combined to make Louisa feel that she was going blind.

Groping her way as she walked slowly forward, she seemed to be treading on air, it all appeared so terribly unreal; she was just about to reach out for a chair, that

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seemed poised in mid-air, when a voice called out: "Shut the door!"

As if by magic, the scene assumed a greater degree of reality and clearness, and, as she turned again after closing the door, she confronted the man whose rasp voice had so confused her a few minutes ago.

His face was familiar, and she racked her brain to remember where she had seen him before. Why, it was last night when she was standing at the door of her lodgings, just after she had returned from the theatre; the answer flashed before her eyes like a message, and she saw the whole scene repeat itself with the utmost distinctness; then she seated herself in response to an order which she fancied was intended for her—it was certainly hurled in her direction.

"I am Louisa Collins," she found herself saying, "and you sent for me, didn't you?—at least I suppose you are Mr. Biester——"

"So—you are the Collins girl, are you?" exclaimed Biester looking at her fixedly, al-

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most as if he appeared to be amused, as she thought.

"Yes," said Louisa simply, and paused abruptly, for as she glanced up again she realized that she was being subjected to a rigid and searching scrutiny.

Presently she listened more intently, for Biester was saying that he supposed she was full of temperament like the rest of them; then his bantering tone changed, and he assumed a more suggestive attitude as he went on to say that he took it for granted she could act anything at a minute's notice, and was prepared to furnish her own costumes and so forth—unless, as he added slyly, she could induce some gilded fool to part with enough of his income to do the trick for her.

"What do you expect me to do?" she asked wonderingly, for his remarks sounded rather involved to her.

"What can you do? Got any specialty? Had any experience?"

"I don't know——," began Louisa in a weak voice, for the quick, sharp way he

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brought his questions out made her feel rather uncomfortable.

“Can you play, sing, or dance?”

“A little—I think;” but she could get no further, for she was beginning to quail before the steeliness of that cold blue eye, as many another had done.

“Which?” and the suddenness of the question almost made the girl jump; but she recovered herself quickly, as she fancied that just such questions were always asked in the course of such a business as his.

“I can sing and play—a little——”

“You can, eh?” was the rather impertinent rejoinder. “Well, go to the piano and show us what you are good for. Don’t be nervous, and don’t be a fool! Come, Jerry, get up and give the lady a chance!”

Louisa seated herself on the piano stool, which had just been vacated by a sallow-faced young man with sandy hair, and drew off her gloves, trying hard to appear calm as she strove to marshal her thoughts into some semblance of order, for everything

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might depend on how she came through this ordeal.

As she sat there for an instant helpless, trying to gain a little time as she unfastened her veil, she tried to make up her mind what she should play.

She struck a few cords, at first softly, tentatively, then a few more, decidedly and with more vigor. She knew what she would do now, and she suddenly made up her mind to do it, with the determination that she would succeed.

The drawing of several deep breaths and the striking of the chords brought back the color to her pale cheeks, and her small audience faded away, for she was a greater artiste than she knew, and once more she was just the girl who had often amused her mother's guests. They, of course, had been quite as ignorant as she that they were entertaining an angel unawares. All they knew, and all they cared to know, was that she caught their fancy for a moment, amused them, and then each went their sev-

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eral ways, self-absorbed, quite pleasantly satisfied with themselves.

With her heart beating fast, she glanced up at Biester with a smile; and there was roguishness in it and a dash of coquetry, for she knew now, beyond a doubt, that she would succeed, and if the memory of other days had come for a brief instant, it had gone just as quickly. She instinctively felt that a new day had dawned for her, a day pregnant with happiness and soft desires. Then she began to play. First came a Spanish dance, recalled from the storehouse of other days, and originally found in a collection of music whose authors are not worth remembering; then followed a song once the rage in Paris, the questionable French words set to an old familiar American air; and to cap the performance, which had been up to the present moment a remarkable one, she gave two or three imitations of well-known actresses, ending up with Mabelle String's now famous song from *The Dream of Love*.

It was at this moment that the door

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opened and a woman entered. She paused on the threshold and surveyed the scene. Everyone waited to see what she would do, for it was the great String herself. At once she came forward, and, taking Louisa's hand, kissed it. Biester laughed as if he were relieved, while Louisa burst into tears. This was due more to nervousness than to anything else, but she was touched by the great artiste's gracious little act, for it meant that Mabelle String at once saw latent genius in Louisa Collins. It was a dramatic moment for all concerned. However, she soon recovered her self-possession and fell naturally into conversation with the woman who was destined to be her friend, for Mabelle proved herself such even before she left the room.

"I am at the Hotel Navarre," she said as she rose to leave, "and if you want any advice, or I can give you any points, just come to me. I mean it, and I want you to come. I'm always in about five o'clock."

"You are very kind, I am sure——" be-

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gan Louisa, but Miss String stopped her with a superb gesture.

“And see here, Charlie, don’t you try any phoney business with this young lady!” but before Biester could say a word in protest the great lady had waved an airy farewell and flitted gracefully from the room, leaving in her wake the odor of some pungent perfume.

“Isn’t that Mabelle all over?” exclaimed Biester, mopping his brow. “In like a whirlwind and gone like a zephyr. She’ll write me later, for she entirely forgot what she came to say. It was you that drove it out of her head. You’re in luck, for Mabelle don’t take a shine to everyone.”

“I am sorry——,” ventured Miss Collins.

“Well, you haven’t any call to be,” remarked Charlie drily; “but,” he continued, “you could have knocked me silly with a feather when she blew in. You see you never can tell where Mabelle is at; but don’t worry, my dear, you and she’ll be friends, all right, all right!”

“I am glad she likes me,” said Louisa,

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"for I've always been anxious to meet her. You see," she continued, confidentially "I've always loved the theatre, and my greatest ambition was to be an actress."

"You ain't that yet," laughed Charlie; "but I ain't a-saying you'll not be if a certain party comes up to time."

"Who?" broke in Louisa impetuously.

"That's telling," objected Biester. "But this much I will say, and that is, that you've got a friend you can get anything out of if you only work him right, and, from what he said, I think he'll put up for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say," answered the other mysteriously, lighting another cigar as he spoke. "But I can't understand what he means, for Steve is a queer dick—but there, I've gone and let out his name when he told me not to! Well, there's not much harm done, for he'll be round before a great while, and then you and he can have a talk. Take my advice and play up to him, for you can't do much without money in little old New

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York, especially in these hard times, and he's got oodles of it."

"I see," answered Louisa, bewildered; "but I think I'll see him first, before I——"

"He's a good fellow is Steve, and this ain't costing you nothing. But if I were a girl just starting out on a new tack, what with the gifts you have, which don't count for beans unless you've got the cash to push them, to say nothing of having Mabelle on your side, why—I would think twice before I turned Stephen down."

"I'll think it over."

"Yes, do!" agreed Biester, rising; "but come into my private room, for we've got to have a little talk about business; and seeing you and I are both friends of Steve's, I'm going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle." And he led the way into his own sanctum.

"See here, Jerry," he called out, "you can send Steve in when he comes; but no one else—see?"

Louisa walked to the window and looked out. It was not until the manager came

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in, and seated himself at his desk, that she turned and faced him.

What she saw was a very fat man, with fiery red hair. His only redeeming feature were his eyes of steely blue, which had the habit of looking directly at you. He was totally indifferent as to his personal appearance, and Louisa noticed, too, that he was unshaven. But on the whole, she accepted him for what he was—a keen, shrewd business man.

“I know what you are thinking of!” and at his expressed thought Miss Collins had the grace to blush.

“Oh! do you?” she exclaimed in dismay; and then, “Oh! I—am sure you don’t.”

She had almost said “hope” and was glad she checked herself in time, for it would have been tactless to say such a thing, and to show lack of tact during this, the most important interview, perhaps of her life, would, she felt, have been fatal.

“Yes!” he answered slyly; “you were thinking that my bark is worse than my bite. But you don’t know me at all if you

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think that. I have a little of the Jew in me—just a dash, but it's enough. My grandmother was a Jewess, but the rest of us were brought up in father's faith, the Protestant—though it's long enough since I saw the inside of a church, I can tell you."

"I thought you were a Jew," remarked Louisa, smiling.

"Yes, I know that," answered Charlie, amused, "and I can tell you I owe my success to that one drop of foreign blood in my veins. By it I have been enabled to know men, all except the Jews, who would do me if they could; and it is the Jew in me which has made what I am—cautious, shrewd, and difficult to fool with. It is that, too, which has made me spell success out of failure!"

"It is a splendid quality!" said Louisa enthusiastically.

"Yes," agreed Biester drily, "but that's enough about me."

"And this is where I come in, I suppose?" added Louisa mischievously.

"Yes," answered the other; "and I shall

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draw a picture which will show you better than anything else what I mean. It will be chock-full of home truths, and I am afraid you will find it crude, ugly, and rather sordid."

"I am not so sensitive nor so easily frightened as that, if you are trying to dissuade me from——"

"Going on the stage?" asked Biester quickly. "No, I guess I couldn't do that, not if your mind is set on it."

"Then what?" exclaimed Louisa impatiently.

Biester did not at once reply, but he looked at her quizzically.

Suddenly she looked up as if compelled, and met his eyes. Then he spoke.

"You've been wondering like as not, what I've been thinking of, and why I don't go on."

Louisa started, and then, with a faint shrug of her shoulder, smiled, realizing the absolute futility of deceiving this man, even had she wished to.

"Yes," she said, "that is just what I was

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doing; but—how did you know? You must be——”

“A mind-reader? Yes, my dear, I think I am. But listen, for I have somewhat to say before Marlowe comes—that’s his other name, and you may as well know it as not. Still, all this needn’t take long if you can keep yourself from butting in too often, so I’ll get a move on and have it over.”

“Please go on!” begged Louisa, wondering what was coming next, “and I promise not to interrupt more often than I can help.”

“You know that Steve Marlowe by this time, if you’ve been attending to me, is the salt of the earth——”

“Well——” broke in Louisa, and then paused.

“But how can you expect me to paint a picture without creating an atmosphere? A lot you know about art if you talk like that—and you wanting to be an actress, too! You’ve got lots to learn before that happens. Why, that’s elementary!”

“But the painting—you don’t have to

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create an atmosphere——” objected Louisa.

“You don’t!” exclaimed the manager, as if surprised; “well, that’s the first I heard of it. However, painting ain’t much in my line, though I know a lot about stage managing, and it would be mighty poor business to jump right into a situation without leading up to it.”

“I thought a play was really a series of pictures, and——”

“My dear girl!” remonstrated Biester, “I’ve given up my morning to you to please Steve, but I ain’t a-going to waste time by splitting hairs with you or anyone else.”

Louisa laughed softly and, looking down, smoothed out one of her gloves which lay in her lap.

“I ain’t a-going to say another word about Steve,” cried Charlie, nettled by her attitude as well as by her manner; “but I’ll tell you this much, young woman, that all the pictures you have of the stage and stage life, you’ve got from the ‘front’: wait till you go behind the scenes, and then you’ll realize the difference. It’s hard work from

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the start, and jealousy—lots of both! Oh! it's a killing life, a dog's fight for first place, and you'll wish you'd never been born before you've been at it long. So help me, it's the truth. I tell you, girl, until you're way up the ladder and can stand alone, it's a life of toil, of slavery, where you don't dare to call your soul your own, a treadmill that won't stop even to remove the dead body that has fallen out of sheer fatigue. You think it's all fun and cigarettes and applause and suppers, and such like, but you'll see; however, don't let me discourage you!"

"Is there any chance for me?"

"Yes," replied Biester, "there is if you can pay your way; otherwise not, and that's flat! Steve is financing this show to a certain extent. It's to go on in January, and I should ask—his advice, and perhaps his help, if you can pocket your pride."

"Oh! I am afraid I couldn't!" exclaimed the girl, recoiling. "It would be such a horrible thing to do!"

"You'll have to get over that habit of

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being over particular, if you decide to go into the profession. I'll be frank with you. When Steve pointed you out and said he wanted you to have your chance, I was dead set against it; but, as he was the backer, I couldn't refuse at least to look you up, and give you a show, if I found you knew your A, B, C's. Now that I've heard you sing and play, I don't believe I'd make a mistake if I did sign you for a small part: only—there's the financial question! This is an A-1 show, bang-up, and most of the girls have money, or the means of getting it; so you see it's a good deal a matter of commercialism. Then, too, you're a lady born—I could see that the very first moment I laid eyes on you—and you'll see a good deal that will doubtless sicken you at first; but it don't do to be too particular—it ain't classy—and besides, they say it's only the first step that hurts, so you'll soon be like the rest of them, I suppose—protected." And he laughed coarsely.

Louisa who had risen, flushed and turned abruptly away. She was almost on the

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verge of tears, but a strong feeling of anger and disgust shook her and prevented any display of such weakness.

"I could accept the protection of no man unless I loved him," she said proudly.

"Of course, if you still have scruples or a conscience, you will have to square it with yourself somehow—I understand that; but what ever you do, why, I believe it's the money that counts for most, after all."

Louisa sat down and, bending forward, buried her head in her hands. She wept hysterically for some moments, while Biester looked on coldly, for he knew what the outcome would be. He was thoroughly accustomed to it, and knew to a second just how to gauge the duration of these passionate outbursts.

Presently she looked up, her face as white as chalk, and Biester knew he had made her understand exactly what she must give—*herself!*

"I will do what is expected of me, only I must have time," was all she said, as she rose to her feet.

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"You can let me know by ten o'clock to-morrow; after that the offer is closed. Here is a copy of the contract. Read it over carefully."

Louisa from childhood had been spoiled, and having no honesty in her make-up was in fact morally stunted, simply because she had had no moral training, and consequently no standards; otherwise she would have hesitated and would more surely have led up to the situation especially when it was a question of accepting a life which would make a social outcast of her.

Miss Collins bowed her head and moved slowly towards the door, when, without warning, it was flung open and a man stood on the threshold. It was Stephen Marlowe. Louisa pulled down her veil hastily and drew back.

"This is the girl, Steve," said Biester, coming forward and turning to point out Louisa. "I'll get out, so's you can have your little talk together in private."

After the manager had gone, Stephen advanced and bowed, while Louisa, with a

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faint inclination of her head, crossed the room and sat down in the chair by the window, raising her veil as she did so.

Stephen followed but remained silent, looking down at her, too excited to speak.

Louisa gazed at him as if fascinated. Her lips parted, and her breath came more quickly.

But she paused suddenly and reflected. She understood that this was the only way for her to obtain an engagement with Biester, for had he not told her so himself?

A few minutes later they went out into the outer office together. As Louisa passed Biester's desk, she told him she would call to sign the contract to-morrow, for she was entirely satisfied with it.

CHAPTER VI

MARY IS DISAPPOINTED

THAT night Louisa deliberately lied to Mary.

The two women were having their usual talk preparatory to going to bed.

It was not until a few minutes before Mary left that Louisa began to speak of the future, and that was the actual prelude to the falsehood itself.

"I am going on the stage," she announced, abruptly but calmly, "and as you are going to be married so soon, I shall have to think about finding other quarters."

"Oh! my dear!" exclaimed Mary, and could say no more, for she was more moved by Louisa's announcement than she cared to acknowledge.

She would feel the parting with her friend, for she had had but few wrenches in her life, and what would make it worse

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was the absolute indifference with which Louisa contemplated it.

“Have you any plans?”

Mary’s voice, gentle and sweet as it was, roused Louisa from her reverie, and she looked up and smiled, for it was just the opening she had been hoping for; now she could tell her lie, and be happy in the thought that an incubus which had weighed down her spirits was removed, and that she could breathe more freely.

“Yes,” she said, “it is the most wonderful piece of luck! You see, I met my brother to-day—I thought he was in the Klondike still, and—he has no objection to my going on the stage—it will be so nice for us to live together—he suggested it—I can feel so much safer and—protected, you know.”

“I am glad, dear!” answered Mary, wondering at the sudden color which had sprung up in the other’s cheeks; “and what is his name?”

“His name is—Stephen.” And she laughed.

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“Why do you laugh?” asked Mary curiously.

“Because, don’t you see—it was so funny meeting him so unexpectedly like that, when I—thought he was so far away!”

“Yes,” remarked Mary dryly, though she did not understand why she should feel that Louisa’s mood did not somehow ring true. “I shall feel more comfortable about leaving you if I know you are in safe hands.”

“Oh, you needn’t have the slightest fear for me,” answered Louisa glibly; “I shall be quite all right with—Stephen.”

The incomprehensible pause which followed made Mary feel uncomfortable, though she did not know why, being too simple to give it any further thought; yet she sighed, and wondered why she did so.

“You can’t imagine what a funny thing it was,” continued Louisa gayly, “to have a big fellow like that take me in his arms and—kiss me!”

“Why, dear?”

“Well, you see,” Louisa went on thoughtfully, glancing up at Mary from time to

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time, "he was grown up when he went—West. In fact, I didn't remember him. Just think! and my own brother, too. It was ridiculous, wasn't it? I felt almost——"

"What, dear?" asked Mary gently, though a trifle anxiously, as Louisa paused.

"Why, that it was a strange man, of course. What did you think I meant? You are very—strange, Mary!"

"Am I, dear? I'm tired, I suppose," she said, rising from the armchair where she had seated herself; "I really think I'll go to bed. Good night!" And Mary kissed her friend more tenderly than usual before she left the room.

Louisa rose from the bed where she had been sitting, and going over to the dressing-table, sank down in the chair before it, resting her chin in her hands and gazing fixedly at her reflection in the mirror. She was not thinking of herself, however, and was scarcely conscious of the lovely face she saw looking back at her, for her mind was too completely engrossed with the events of

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the day to allow anything else to interfere with her thoughts.

Crossing the room again, she sat down in the armchair which Mary had just vacated, and, after lighting a cigarette, rested her head on the back of the chair and closed her eyes. She was not even sleepy, however, and the unconscious action merely helped her to shut out the present, and enabled her to give herself up more thoroughly to the happenings of the day.

What a day, and how full of varying emotions it had been? She reached, in course of time, the moment when she and Stephen had left together, and her last words to Biester came back to her with a greater significance than at the time they were spoken. She had merely told him that she consented to the terms of the contract, and would call the following morning to sign it. But in the light of her previous conversation with Biester, these simple words lost their innocent meaning, and became in fact an admission that she had consented to become Stephen's mistress.

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Whatever she said to the contrary, or whatever course she pursued, Biester would never believe otherwise. Suppose she regretted her decision and wished to recede from her implied promise to Stephen, could she do so? She feared not; for where else was she to get the money which Biester had given her to understand was essential if she wished to enter his company? He did not think that she should give herself to Stephen in particular, but he had practically forced her toward him by saying that he had a great deal of money. The money was necessary; Stephen had it, and in so many words Biester had made Marlowe a person of importance in her calculations.

Suppose, just for the sake of the argument, she should decide to give Stephen up, for she had not actually crossed the Rubicon yet, and still went to sign the contract to-morrow morning, Biester thinking that she and Stephen really belonged to each other, could she trust to the pride and honour of her promised lover to save the

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situation by keeping the secret? No, it was out of the question. But even if she got the employment at the theatre on what could be only looked on as false pretences, how could she manage to save enough to afford the luxuries and comforts her heart craved? It was clearly an impasse, and after reflection she concluded that it would be better to let matters take their own course, and cease these futile questionings, which led nowhere.

She rose and flung her cigarette into the grate, feeling unable to cope with such an endless chain of argument indefinitely; besides, she always came back to the original starting point after every wandering into what proved to be merely blind alleys. Why not accept the proposition as binding? For it would, she felt reasonably certain, prove the wisest course in the end.

Louisa took up her candle from the dressing-table and, after placing it beside her, threw back the covers and got into bed. Her eyes were wide open, for she could not woo sleep until she rehearsed the day's doings again?

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She had lunched with Stephen, and after they had finished their meal he had sent for writing materials, requesting her to write and despatch a formal letter of resignation to the department store; now, as she remembered this incident, she realized that she had indeed burnt her boats. This fact made it impossible for her to give Stephen up. She was bound to live with him if she expected to exist, not only in comfort, but at all, unless she found another situation which would enable her to eke out just such another existence as the one she had already left.

She turned on her side and peered into space, finally making up her mind, that once having had luxuries and extraordinary comforts held out to her as a bait, she could not bear to go down the scale again to the same level she was planning to leave. She had had a mild taste of the delights that were to come that very day, for Stephen had driven her in his own carriage through the park, and—no, she could not, would not, give up voluntarily the luxurious life on

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whose threshold she was even now standing.

Having reached this point, Louisa believed that a union with a man like Stephen Marlowe, or anyone else, would not seriously disturb her plan of life, so she blew out the candle, and tried to sleep but could not.

The next morning Louisa, after a troubled night, did not waken until half-past eight o'clock, and, remembering that Stephen was coming to fetch her at quarter to ten, she dressed herself quickly, so as to be ready for him.

He was a little ahead of time for his appointment, and when he knocked at the door, she did not bid him enter for a few seconds, and then it was in an indifferent tone of voice.

When he entered, Louisa was engaged in pinning on her hat, and he, taking in the delicious curve of her throat as she half turned to him, went quickly to her, and bending her head back over his arm, kissed her soft white throat and bewitching lips many times.

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The girl closed her eyes as if she were overcome, though otherwise her expression was enigmatical, and when he released her, opened them, looking at him reproachfully.

"You should never kiss me when I am pinning on my hat," she said petulantly, as she pushed him gently away; "it is a very dangerous thing to do!" But her eyelids drooped for an instant as she ceased speaking, and then she looked up at him coquettishly.

Stephen thought she looked very winsome and sweet, and he held her in his arms once more in rapture.

Louisa playfully released herself and pinned on her veil with deft fingers, while Marlowe looked at her, his whole being thrilling with an exalted love he never dreamed he possessed until now. Louisa noticed all these signs of danger, but she only laughed lightly and reminded him that they had better be starting, as she supposed that when Biester told her to come at ten o'clock he probably meant it.

On the way to the Manager's Office Mar-

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lowe received his first lesson in manners, for, when he attempted to take her arm as they walked along to the subway, she corrected him.

"You must never do that—Stevie," she objected, calling him for the first time by his name. "I am a lady, you see, and I supposed you were enough of a gentleman to know better."

Stephen flushed, but as Louisa was looking straight before her she did not notice that anything was amiss.

In outward appearance, Stephen was absolutely correct, from his smart patent leather boots to his loose gray Melton overcoat, for his valet had seen to it that he patronized a fashionable tailor. But Stephen wanted more than the mere apparel, much as that might mean.

Many lessons in deportment and English transformed him into an entirely different man from what he was a few weeks ago, when he arrived in New York. His great ambition was to become in time a gentleman, and, as he was not ashamed of his

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deficiencies, he made extraordinary progress.

He had the good sense to accept his servant as a model, and, finally conquering a natural feeling of diffidence, had frankly asked his advice about various matters which puzzled him. Jenkins, being a well-trained English servant, had welcomed and expected this, and the results were most gratifying and surprising to him. When Stephen made mistakes he recognized them, had the grace to laugh at his awkwardness, and always made a mental note of his shortcomings.

One thing, however, he did not understand, and that was, women in general, and particularly this woman who walked by his side.

"That's a lovely dress you're wearing—Louisa," he said shyly, and he hesitated as he called her by her first name. "I like green on you—it just suits your style."

"The shade's all right—but it's rather flimsy for this time of year."

"Still, I like it just the same," insisted

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Marlowe, who had failed to understand the hint she had given him.

"I'm glad you like it," sighed Louisa; but it's rather—thin, you know!"

"Well, I am a booby!" exclaimed Marlowe with contrition; and then, reproachfully, "why didn't you sing out that you was—I mean, were cold? Come, let's step lively."

Louisa laughed, but the hardness of the sound was lost on Stephen, for he was by this time swinging along a step or two in advance, to encourage her to follow and warm up. He stopped, that she might catch up with him, and, seeing the colour which the brisk walk had brought to her cheeks, smiled insinuatingly. Louisa laid her hand on his arm, and he misinterpreting her action, gently pressed it.

They climbed the stairs to Biester's offices, and were shown in at once.

The manager was sitting with his feet on his desk, his silk hat on the back of his head, and the everlasting cigar in his mouth.

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"So you came after all, did you, Louie," he asked, removing the cigar from his lips just long enough to permit him to speak, but not changing his position, "I most feared you wouldn't."

Louisa looked coldly at him, understanding quite well the atmosphere he was trying to create by his slightly sneering tone, and was silent.

"And Steve, too—," continued Biester blandly and smiling unctuously. "And now," he said with a quick change of manner, glancing sharply at Louisa, "have you brought the contract with you?"

"Yes," she said, "here it is"; and she laid the paper on Biester's desk, then drew back, and talked to Stephen in a low voice.

The conversation between the two was soon brought to an apparently satisfactory conclusion, for Stephen suddenly moved forward and stood by Biester's desk.

"See here, Charlie, old man!" he said in that hearty way of his, "before Miss Collins signs the contract, I've a private matter to settle with you. I've given up thousands so

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far, and I'll give the rest too, because I promised I would; but I want this young lady saved all sorts of bother—I intend that she shall have a fair show, for I think she has good stuff in her. Now here's an extra cheque, which I hope will make it possible to carry out my wishes." Then he solemnly shook hands with Biester.

"By the powers!" he exclaimed enthusiastically, "you're a brick, Steve, and I'll promise you that it'll be O. K. and she needn't worry. It'll be all right—all right."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Stephen dryly, for he knew his friend thoroughly, "but I expect my wishes carried out to the letter—see?"

"Sure thing, Steve," agreed Charlie airily; "now don't you worry about Louie, she'll be all right, I tell you. And you know when I talk that way, you can bet your last penny I mean to make good. But I'll tell you one thing; if the girl don't come up to the standard, you'll let me off—."

"Don't give me any more hot air! You know Miss Collins is going to make a name

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for herself, and I'm not going to have you butting in to spoil the game."

"You don't say," replied Biester, with a touch of impertinent suggestion in his tone.

"I was about to remark that she was my find," said Stephen quietly, "and I'll trouble you to—mind your own—business!"

"That's all right, Steve! Don't get grouchy. I guess she has talent, and you'll have a call to be proud of her before long."

Stephen muttered something in reply which Biester did not catch, but, after a few minutes' more talk, it was agreed between the two men that the girl was to be engaged to play the part of Marsilla, the miller's wife, in *The Fireflies*.

Then Louisa stepped forward and signed the contract.

"And now, Stevie," she said, turning to him, "you wait for me—downstairs. I've just a word to say to Charlie in private. After that I have some shopping to do, and perhaps you'd better come along too—I may need you."

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She and the manager faced each other. They were alone.

"Stevie was right," she said in low tones; "you know how it is—going to be with us—of course you do—oh, yes! I'm going to follow out your advice, and I—don't want you to—spoil my other life too—my theatrical career, I mean."

"That'll be all right—on the dead, it will—I've given Steve my word, and you can—trust me! But, say!" as she turned toward the door, "have you thought about what your stage name's to be?"

"Louisa—or rather Louise Benner," she answered, quickly correcting herself.

She bowed her thanks to the manager, then hurried out to join Stephen below, and so missed the low chuckle which Biester gave, as he slowly rubbed his hands together.

CHAPTER VII

LOUISA IN NEW QUARTERS

LOUISA started preparations for her stage career under the most favorable auspices. She not only possessed all the gowns her heart could wish but soon found herself the mistress of a really charming little apartment, central and convenient to the theatre. It was arranged—for the present, at least—that Stephen should retain his rooms at his hotel and come to the apartment as a visitor whenever he pleased. He had placed a carriage at her disposal, besides giving her a separate allowance, that she might feel independent—in fact, she had but to express a wish and it was at once gratified.

The day before she moved into the apartment was Mary's wedding day. This, and the event of the marriage, were destined to be vividly impressed on Louisa's memory.

She had left Mary after luncheon that day, her new trunks having been packed

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and dispatched in the morning by the smart French maid which Marlowe's forethought had provided.

Louisa had found everything ready for her when she arrived, so all she had to do was to wander around and admire the arrangements for her comfort which Stephen, with the efficient aid of Marthe, had provided. There were flowers in profusion, too, and these soothed and pleased her. She had tea served in her boudoir, and afterwards walked about studying her part, or trying over some of her songs on the piano, for she had been to her first rehearsal the day before.

She was not at all discouraged, for McCoy, the stage manager, had given her to understand that if she expected to learn she must be patient and not mind being ordered about. He showed her how to walk, told her in a general way the business that was to be introduced in her part, so that, after a two hours' drilling, she began to feel less awkward, although she realized there was ever so much harder work ahead; this was only

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a breather. In the afternoon she called on Mantini, the singing-master, and made arrangements with him to teach her her part.

He was very kind, and complimented her upon her voice, explaining that a few months' hard study would improve it wonderfully. There were other things he had explained to her, but by that time she was tired, and could not absorb the full meaning of what he said, so he dismissed her with the final injunction not to catch cold.

After she had finished rehearsing and singing, Marthe had come and asked if mademoiselle would have the light switched on. No, mademoiselle preferred to sit in the dusk.

"And I shall ring for you later," Louisa had added; "but if I forget you had better come and tell me when it is time to dress."

"Very good," had answered Marthe demurely.

"But dinner——" had asked her mistress in dismay, "I forgot to——"

"Ah, it has already been ordered," the maid had replied, with an intonation which

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at the time struck Louisa as strange, but which she had not stopped to analyze. "Monsieur sent word to the chef it would be at half-past seven o'clock, mademoiselle."

"But is he coming, then?" she had inquired suspiciously.

"Who knows?" the maid had remarked in a small voice, at the same time shrugging her shoulders. "That good Mr. Jenkins——"

"Mr. Marlowe's man," had exclaimed Louisa, scenting a plot. "Tell him to come to me—at once."

The maid had gone out, but returned almost immediately.

"I regret——" she had started to say deprecatingly, when the voice of her mistress interrupted her impatiently.

"He is gone, then?"

"But yes"—this had been said very softly—"on the instant, even. Still the chef told me——"

"What?" then had asked Louisa, sharply.

"That the valet said he must hurry off and get home, as his master was going out to dinner and he had to get his clothes."

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“Very well,” Louisa had remarked, sighing, for she had felt relieved by the woman’s words, dreading as she did Marlowe’s first visit, and glad that he was not apparently coming to see her that night, “you may go.”

How clear it all seemed. How every detail stood out, she thought, as she woke at dawn the following morning, for the night had passed—and another day was dawning!

Now her memory went back to the moment of her first meeting with Marlowe; then the various events of the days that followed had grown clearer as they advanced. It was considerate of him, she thought, to give her plenty of time in which to arrange their apartment, before coming there himself permanently, for he was an impetuous lover, and he was impatient for their days of happiness to begin as soon as possible.

He was generous, too, for had he not placed her in one of the most charming and handsomely furnished apartments in New York? The luxury and color of it all

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warmed her heart toward him, for she thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated it to the depths of her artistic soul.

The drawing-room door was thrown open as she was waiting for some one to tell her dinner was ready; and just as she was becoming impatient, wondering vaguely whether she had better not ring, Jenkins announced that dinner was served. As she advanced to the door, Jenkins having discreetly withdrawn, suddenly Marlowe came in, and seizing both her hands in his, complimented her upon her charming appearance.

The dinner was delicious, and perfectly served. Louisa enjoyed immensely acting the hostess, and the pleasurable feeling swept over her that, after all, was she not giving to this man a taste of the life luxurious—something he had never experienced before. She lingered over her coffee—nervously, feverishly, for the fumes of the wine she had consumed liberally were rising. But she turned to him gayly, almost recklessly, and, he, with an expectant light in his eyes,

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came to her. But—now the night had passed, and she knew she could never go back to yesterday.

Had her feelings toward Stephen changed since then? No, she could not say that. But somehow everything seemed different; even she herself was not the same. Still, Stephen had already shown consideration for her in many unexpected ways, that she found herself growing fond of him. Otherwise—she could never have accepted him as her lover.

Her mind was becoming more detached, however, until suddenly she remembered she had a rehearsal at half-past nine and a singing lesson at noon; then, too, she had almost forgotten that it was Mary's wedding day.

Before she went out, she sent a note to Stephen to say that she would be passing down Fifth Avenue a few minutes before one o'clock, so he must be on the lookout for her, as he had promised to take her to lunch. And he was not to forget that she and her *brother* were invited to Mary Ban-

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nerman's wedding with James Garner at half-past four o'clock to-day.

The morning passed quickly, and shortly after noon Miss Benner turned into 44th Street on her way to a fitting of her stage costumes, which had already been ordered.

Stephen had returned to the hotel only twenty minutes ago, and was walking up and down impatiently before the house, fuming at the delay, for he had had a peculiarly depressing morning with his broker and lawyer on the subject of certain investments which had turned out badly; so he was rather out of sorts and inclined to take a most serious view of business and things in general.

Presently, however, he caught sight of Louisa, and she looked so trim and smart in a new model she had bought until her other dresses were ready, that his black mood passed as he walked down to meet her.

"Good morning, Stevie," she said coyly, as she shook hands with him. "I am awfully hungry. Let's go and get something to eat."

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"Sure," answered he; for so great was the pleasure this meeting gave him that he lapsed unconsciously for a moment into his accustomed slang. "What do you say to Rector's? It's not far. Come along."

Louisa smiled, and they started off briskly, for she was almost famished after her hard morning's work.

While enjoying their luncheon Stephen leaned forward and laughingly, but in low tones so that only she could hear, said that he hoped she did not consider him a country bumpkin, for he felt quite like one in the presence of such a dainty morsel as she.

Louisa petted his hand, remarking that he was only a great big boy after all, but telling him almost in the same breath not to be a fool—that she thought he was a good fellow, and that she was beginning to appreciate all that he was doing for her.

"I like Marthe, too," she went on to say in conclusion; "besides, she gives me a chance to brush up my French——"

"If there is anything else you want——" began Marlowe, looking at her with his soul

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in his eyes, but Louisa stopped him with a pretty, peremptory gesture.

"You are doing ever so much for me now," she said slyly, "though he only noticed the faint hesitation in her speech, "and I am sure I don't deserve it."

After an animated discussion on this important subject, Marlowe called for the check, and shortly afterwards they left, for Louisa had eaten heartily, and she felt she must have a long walk.

"We have a good hour before it's time to go to that silly wedding——"

"Is it necessary," drawled Marlowe, "for us to go to a wedding at all?"

"Quite," answered Louisa, as she pushed the door open and made her way into the street, where, though a few snowflakes were falling, Stephen felt that May was in his heart as he followed her quickly, for she had deliberately marched along, leaving him to follow as best he could.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BEGINNING OF A CAREER

THE church where Mary was to be married was crowded when Stephen and Louisa entered it, but almost at once a familiar voice made itself heard, and Louisa, turning, confronted Harry Vantine, who stood there smiling and evidently in his best clothes, for he looked and seemed extremely uncomfortable.

"I most thought you wouldn't turn up," exclaimed he, "at least that's what I told Mary—but she said I was getting too lippy and not to bother her."

"I promised to come, you know," said Louisa. "This is my brother——"

"Pleased to know you," said the young man, nodding to Stephen; "any friend of yours," he said glibly, and winking at Louisa, "is a friend of mine. Now, what——" He was about to say, "Now, what can I show you." But he checked himself in time.

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“But what’s the matter with me?” he continued almost immediately. “I’m getting dotty, I guess. Mary said to bring you to her as soon ’s you come—came. This way—no, you”—to Stephen—“wait here, and I’ll bring her back in a jiffy. Hurry up, Louisa, we ain’t got much time, and Jim’s as nervous as a cat. He’s scared to death. Take my arm, so ’s we can get along quicker.”

Louisa found Mary, who was frankly delighted to see her.

“I have but a moment to give you, dear,” she said, embracing the girl warmly.

“And I have to run off immediately afterwards,” added Louisa, looking away, for she could not say that she had promised to have tea with Stephen; “you know I’m working hard these days.”

Mary smiled, but Louisa did not notice it, as she was engaged in examining the bride’s dress critically. She managed to avoid meeting Mary’s eye, remarking that she was awfully sorry she had to leave so soon, but she was not her own mistress now.

“I shall miss you, dear,” Mary was say-

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ing, "for you have meant a great deal to me—I have tried to make it up to you when you were in trouble—but you were too tired to realize all that I was doing. However, I did what I could, and—I am glad you came to-day, for I think it shows you must have appreciated it after all."

"Oh, yes," answered Louisa, fingering the lace on Mary's sleeve and wondering how much it cost a yard, "and I shall never forget it—your kindness to me, I mean."

"I am glad," said Mary dreamily. "And you will give my regards to your brother. It was very nice of him to come with you, especially as he never knew me—but now you must go, for I hear the organist beginning to play the Wedding March, and that is the signal for me to be ready."

Three minutes later the clergyman was reading the simple but impressive words of the Episcopal marriage service, and the organist playing a soft voluntary, added to the intensity which the words themselves produced.

Louisa, sitting beside Stephen gazed

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straight before her as if hypnotized. It seemed almost like a scene in some play. By a supreme effort she recovered herself—for the feeling of disquietude produced by the mental picture had been exceedingly strong,—so that as the service proceeded she managed to listen with more attention to the responses which Mary made in her clear, earnest voice.

She was very silent as she walked home with Stephen, clinging to his arm in a sort of desperation, though at the same time she loved the protection of his presence; but she did not dare speak, for her mind was too full of the strange emotions she had just passed through.

“I think Mary will be very happy,” she said at last.

“How beautiful it is to have a man promise before all the world that he will love and protect a woman as long as she lives. Still to me marriage has its limitations, which rob it of half its charms. I’m not sure that I should like it.”

“I suppose you’re wanting the truth,

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Louie," he said, "but flag me if I'm not off the tracks."

"Of course I am asking for the truth. What did you think I wanted?"

"Whoa, girl—slow—steady there," answered Steve, throwing back his head and laughing heartily, "you're it, and no mistake. Why—little girl, you've answered that question yourself."

"How could that be?" cried Louisa, puzzled. "Why, I haven't said anything——"

"You mean—much," he corrected dryly; "still, the way you flung out your words shows you couldn't ever bend your neck to the yoke—willingly. It might hurt it, y'know, and — it's too pretty to get hurt."

"But—how would it seem to you," she asked at last slowly, trying to suppress any appearance of real interest, "if I were married—personally, I mean?"

"That's rather mixed, my dear girl," he replied, still with an amused expression in his eyes, "because I must confess that I'm not rightly on to what you're driving at. It

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would all depend whether you were my wife or another man's——”

“What difference would that make,” asked Louisa, trying to speak with indifference, though in reality she was distinctly interested at the turn the conversation was taking.

“I believe you’re making a bluff at stringing me—I’m blowed if you’re not,” exclaimed Marlowe. “Listen, if you were my wife, you’d be my wife, and—if you and I were not man and wife, you’d belong to the other fellow.”

“Yes—I see,” she said, determined not to give up just yet; “but—if I were *your* wife——”

“I don’t think you’d like it—and that’s flat,” was the prompt and somewhat unexpected reply.

“But why? I don’t see——”

“Well, I’ll tell you, then, my dear—child,” he continued; “in the first place, you’d have me always with you—like the poor, bless their hearts!”

“I shouldn’t so much mind that,” weakly

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quibbled she, though she was quite certain that her sentiments did not ring true in her own ears; "it would be—lovely."

"It's perfectly ridiculous, my dear girl," he said, with a suspicion of earnestness, "for you to go floundering about in these deep waters, like this—you know as well as I do that you have no right to be in the water at all; the earth, the solid, tangible earth, is your proper place, and—you're nothing but a butterfly—never will be anything else. You would only be happy, like those little winged creatures, when you've got a flower to gather honey from; so why worry that sweet little head by trying to find out where the flowers are coming from, when I am here ready to give you everything your heart can wish for?"

"I fail to see what difference it makes whether I am your wife or your—friend," argued Louisa, "for in both instances I would practically be your wife, and so you would love and support me anyway."

"Yes," said Marlowe quickly, "except that in one case I would be obliged to support

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you, while in our case I do so because I love you."

After Stephen had left her, she wondered whether he was right.

CHAPTER IX

MARTHE LAYS HER PLANS

ON the morning of her début, Louisa saw for the first time one of the posters announcing the initial performance of *The Fireflies* for 8.15 o'clock that evening; and she stared at it as if fascinated, for surely it seemed as if it must be something fanciful and unreal. It was hardly possible that in a few hours' time the great, the longed-for "first" night would be here and, soon after, a thing of the past. She had been dreaming of this wonderful moment for so long, and working so hard to make a success of it, that she began to feel rather nervous when she realized that *the* day had actually come when her formal appearance on the stage was to take place.

What if she should fail, and end her career by being turned out of the theatre then and there?—though this could not be, for her part was too small to have an under-

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study; yet she began to feel worried and ill.

She returned to her flat, and attempted to cheer up her drooping spirits; but it was uphill work, and she felt discouraged and more nervous as the hours dragged along.

She had her part letter-perfect; yet she could not calm herself, for there was always the demon of stage fright lurking in the background. She would fail—she had no business to suppose that she ever could act. Oh! it was going to be terrible, and she wished the evening were over. She regretted that she had forbidden Stephen to come to her until after the first act; he might have been a comfort to her, soothing her fears and pulling her together as no one else could—for he, with all his inexperience in matters theatrical, implicitly believed that she one day would become a great actress.

On reflection, however, she was glad that he had taken her, as the French say, at the foot of the letter—that is, with the fullest understanding—for he might have ener-

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vated her and made her more nervous than she was.

At this point, Marthe entered with a dainty tray, placed it on a little table, and then turned to her mistress.

“Mademoiselle is served,” she announced persuasively; “but see,” as Louisa turned away, “everything is of the most simple, and I must insist——”

“But, Marthe, I simply cannot eat—not a mouthful, I tell you,” cried the young actress. “I am—not hungry.”

“I understand, mademoiselle,” answered the maid, unmoved; “it is always the same with the artistes—they are always this way when they are going to make a big success. The more nerves they have the greater the triumph——”

Louisa turned and confronted the girl.

“Do you really think I am—going to do—well?”

“But assuredly—put yourself in my hands, and do what I say, and everything will go well.”

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“Do you mean it?” asked Louisa in surprise.

“But really,” coolly remarked Marthe; “and in the first place, as the nerves are almost all of them in the stomach, it is essential to calm them by food. Come, mademoiselle, to the table—it is the only way; I insist!”

Louisa smiled at the other’s little air of authority, but nevertheless obeyed meekly, and, after a few attempts, managed to conquer the feeling of weakness that had overtaken her, ending by finishing the contents on the tray.

“Very well,” smiled the instructress; “and you must confess that you feel—better—is it not so?”

Louisa did feel much better, and acknowledged it; but when she asked for a cup of black coffee with a little brandy in it, the maid was inexorable.

“It would not be good for those nerves—not now;” she firmly held her ground, believing that if she gave her lady an inch she would lose all control over her.

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“What next, then?” asked the miller’s wife-to-be, rather amused, as Marthe intended her to be.

“A little walk slowly up and down—for the digestion—and to talk to me frankly about what is on your mind,” said the maid, with compressed lips, which she felt to be in keeping with her role of adviser; “and then I shall clear out all the silly doubts you have lodged there,” she added, without the faintest suspicion of humor.

“But they are not silly,” objected Louisa indignantly, “they are very real; but, of course, how would you be expected to understand how I feel?”

“Because—I *know*,” retorted Marthe with decision; and then, with slightly heightened color, she proceeded: “And have I not been with all the great artistes—Melba—Eames—of the singers, Maxine Elliott—Ethel Barrymore—of the legitimate, and a lot of the others not so important? But what difference does it make whether they are high or low, it is always the same. And they were all the same as

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you—nervous, irritable, fussy, sometimes weeping, and again smiling and laughing. Oh! I like to see them like that, for it means lots of applause and lots of success. It is the truth, I tell you! Now, you talk and I listen—it is a good way.”

Louisa already calmed by the other's volubility, did as she was told, and walked up and down, while the maid waited for the flow of words she knew was bound to follow; and she was not disappointed, for presently the previous misgivings returned with increased force, and Louisa poured out her woes into the sympathetic ear of the trim little servant. She seemed to understand so well what to say, and was so tactful, that Louisa did not suspect that she was acting under Marlowe's orders, to get her in good shape for the evening, as he wanted her to make a big hit in her song in the second act. If she did, and Biester had told him this, then her ultimate success would be assured.

“I know how it will be,” moaned Miss Benner, “when I come on for the first time. You see, there's no one on the stage with

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me—I shall be frightened half out of my wits; I know I shall—seeing all those ghostly faces staring at me. And the applause will terrify me, I am sure!”

“That is just the one thing that will not terrify you,” objected the maid shrewdly; “it has just the opposite effect. But you will see—and then you will thank that kind, good Marthe for telling you the truth.”

After Louisa was bathed and massaged, she took a small cup of consommé, after which she must rest until half-past five, when the maid would come for her. It would be so much nicer, Marthe suggested, to take lots of time to dress so as to be at the theatre at seven o'clock, when she could again dress—this time in her costume—and have plenty of leisure to make up; all should be done quietly so as not to excite more the nerves, for they were, of course, strung tightly enough as it was.

A few minutes before seven Miss Benner arrived at the theatre, and went at once to her dressing-room, which, thanks to Marlowe, she occupied alone, and which also by

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his orders had been elaborately decorated.

Marthe, knowing the effect of environment, very wisely did not allow the young actress to leave the room until the call-boy knocked and asked if Miss Benner was ready; for she did not wish her charge to talk with the other girls, look through the curtain, or do any of the things which to the novice are usually disconcerting. So when Louisa finally made her entrance, she told herself that she felt at ease, and indeed made an excellent impression, for the play was going well, and she caught the fancy of the audience at once.

When, at the end of the act, she went back to her dressing-room, she threw herself down for a few minutes before summoning Marthe to help her to dress for the second act, and sat very still. It was too wonderful to realize that the show was really on!

After she was dressed she dismissed Marthe, saying she wished to be alone.

After a short interval, a knock at the door made her look up, and as she opened it, she wondered if her dismissal of the maid

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had been an intuition that Stephen would really come, for it was he standing there smiling.

"My dear girl!" he said, and then coming quickly to her, took her in his arms. "You were simply great!"

They sat down on the couch, and talked excitedly for the few minutes left to them.

Then there came an authoritative knock at the door. It was the call-boy.

"Miss Benner! Five minutes," he said, and she, answering that she was ready, he passed on to his next call.

Louisa pushed Stephen aside and sprang to her feet. She hastily arranged her hair, and gave a few deft touches to her "make-up," then went to the door and opened it. Only then did she pause and turn, throwing one backward glance at him.

Louisa, during the second act, surpassed herself. She sang, she danced, she coquetted with an abandon and grace which took the house by storm. She was the plaything of the public, and she insinuated herself into their hearts with a verve and manner ut-

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terly irresistible and thoroughly bewitching.

She reached her dressing-room with difficulty, receiving a veritable ovation on her perilous passage there, and found Marthe waiting for her, her face wreathed in smiles. She smiled at her as she entered and closed the door, for she began to look on the young French maid as a sheep-dog, not knowing that she was a fraud and hypocrite, as indeed she herself was, only more so.

Louisa was dressed for the third act long before the curtain rose, for she heard the call-boys going their rounds and announcing "Overture" in their shrill common voices. She had nothing to do, so she took up a polisher and idly rubbed it over her already shining nails.

Tired of inaction, however, Marthe stepped to the door and opened it. Almost at once a young man stepped up and asked if this was where Miss—Benner hung out. Being told it was, he attempted to enter the room, but Marthe barred the way.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked in an aggrieved tone, "you can't keep me

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out! I tell you I will come in! My name's Vantine—tell her it's Harry—I must see her for a minute—just a second—really —”

“Is that you, Mr. Vantine?” called out Louisa, who had heard the whole conversation from the beginning. “Just for a second—until the boy comes—and then I have to go on again.”

“Thank you, Miss Collins—I mean—Benner,” he answered, pushing his way past Marthe, who did not seem disposed to give him even an inch in which to pass; “but can't she”—indicating the maid—“‘vamosé?’—just while I am here—though I've very little to say that all the world mightn't hear and welcome.”

“Just wait outside, Marthe—there's a good girl!”

Harry stood fidgeting and twirling his hat stupidly until Marthe left the room, and then he walked over to where Louisa was sitting, looking at him with a rather amused expression on her face.

“What is it?” she asked, for he was glan-

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cing about curiously. "Remember, you haven't the whole night before you!"

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure, Miss—er—Louisa—but I came to tell you we're all out there, and I was to say that you're way out of sight—that's what they all think, and so do I—honest, I do—but I wish——"

"What?" said Louisa curtly.

"Why—that—say, Miss Benner, don't give me the jumps like that; you see, I've never been in a place like this before, and I've kind of lost my—bearings."

"I see," she said indifferently, "but what I don't understand is how you ever got 'behind' at all——"

"I was just coming to that," he began excitedly—"you see, I met that man—the one you told us was your brother—but we've since found out what—he is to you—and Mary Garner says she and Jim look on you as—dead; but I—listen, Miss Benner—I love you, and I want you to consent to be my wife. You hadn't ought to refuse a chance like this—to look the world in the face and be respected—and—snap your——"

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He stopped short, for Louisa deliberately laughed in his face; the cruelty of the action had stung him like a lash, and he looked at her in horror as soon as he gasped the meaning of her wanton insult.

“No,” she said, looking at him coldly, “it’s too late. I’ve accepted it all—it means all this”—she included the room and its pretty appointments in her comprehensive gesture—“and—lots more! I’m no worse than the rest of them, and not so bad as some, thank God! I’ve chosen my mode of living, and I intend to abide by it!”

“It is *not* too late!” he implored. “See—I’ll take you as my wife—wife, d’you hear?”

“Glad to make me your wife, are you, now that I have become famous as an actress?”

“You are trying to make me unfaithful to my lover,” she continued lightly; “but that is impossible—so you had better go now.”

“Hush!” begged Vantine, “I won’t listen to you any more!”

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“Good-bye, then,” she said sarcastically; “if you really must go—why—oh! am I called? All right, Marthe, I’m coming.” And she ran out without even another glance at the crestfallen young man.

CHAPTER X

WIDENING CIRCLES

LOUISA was dumfounded to learn the news of Miss String's divorce, for she had not known that she was even married. She had not the faintest conception that this piece of news could in any way affect her, for she knew the actress so slightly.

Why should she become absorbed by such a commonplace story, when there were more interesting bits of gossip of the theatrical world to read about?

She was still in bed when she read the paragraph about Mabelle's divorce, and, having pushed her breakfast tray aside, she took up the paper again, reading with avidity the latest plans and doings of Charles K. Biester, who, it was stated, had been abroad for the purpose of interviewing his London and Paris agents. It was rumored that he had purchased two of the latest Pa-

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risian successes, and a most sensational account was given of how he had bought one of these plays in mid-ocean, paid for it, arranged for its translation, made a contract with a well-known actress to play the lead in it, and—all this by wireless!

What amused her most was a statement of two interviews, which coincided in time but not in place. It almost made Miss Benner think the man must be a magician, or else that he had solved the mystery of how to be in two places at the same time. The two dispatches were reported on the same page of one of the best known of the New York dailies, whose news was usually reliable; however, she merely laughed and turned over the page in search of further news.

More about Charles K. Biester! This time he had actually sailed, and, again by wireless, had exchanged greetings with two of his favorite stars, one being in Montreal, the other in Cincinnati. This sounded fantastic, but was evidently true. Biester was a wonder, thought Miss Benner, for he

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never forgot those of his friends who brought him in money; he exploited them, and he advertised both them and himself, or, rather, to be correct, it was the other way about, himself always first, and the others last.

True, he had been kind to her, but it had cost him nothing—oh, no! That was one of the secrets of his success, to take in early and often, but not to spend—more than he could help. He had been kind to her, but only because she had helped to draw good houses for him.

The newspaper, which had fallen aside as her thoughts went wool-gathering, she now folded carefully and tucked under her pillow, and—suddenly she thought of Stephen, who had not been to see her for two days.

To be sure, he had sent her a note, in which he briefly stated that business kept him away; he was making new investments and floating a new company, of which he was to be made president.

Louisa had really nothing to complain of—nothing that she wished for but she could

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have for the asking; yet with feminine perversity she longed for Stephen and wished that he would come to her, for she did not like this spirit of independence he was displaying. When he was with her, of course, it was natural for her to wish him away, especially when he made her feel nervous and irritable, as he sometimes did now, for there was very little originality about Marlowe; and that was why he palled, that was why she felt drawn and repelled at the same time when he came to see her.

She was perfectly aware that he did not love her in the true sense of the word. No one knew that better than she, and she did not really complain—far from it, for her lover was generous to a fault; and he gave her a most liberal allowance, too, which she was made to understand, was to continue until her death.

She wondered how it would be if Stephen really loved her; of course he was always courteous—but would he in any way be different? She smiled; but her expression was enigmatical, just as if she could easily an-

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swer the question if she wished, but preferred to wait before she did so—for Louisa loved, above all things, to tease herself, especially when, as in the present case, the matter was so simple and easy to solve. She laughed, but strangely enough it had a mirthless sound, and she suddenly felt annoyed with herself for no cause whatever—at least none that she could discover, except that she entertained an unaccountable feeling of bitterness towards Marlowe; but no! she did not love him, never had, and never would.

She rang for Marthe, dressed and went out. Two more days passed away, and still Stephen did not come.

He remained away for a week, but Louisa tried not to feel worried. That night, in a spirit of madness, she acted with a dash and verve that carried the house by storm, for she tried to think that Stephen might be out in the dim darkness in front; so she played for him and to him in imagination, though her heart was sad. His absence could mean but one thing—he was tiring of her, and no

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woman, she told herself, likes to feel that she is losing her power over a man. Her heart leaped within her, as the house rose and applauded, for, after all, had she not won success at a bound?

Biester, who had returned, was called for, to appear with her before the curtain. The applause that greeted them did not cease until Louise had made a little speech, and kissed her hand in good-night. And yet it all seemed like a dream. When she returned after the play to her apartment she passed in like a ghost, and, sinking into a chair in the dark sitting-room, cried as if her heart would break, for she felt so terribly alone, even in the midst of her triumph.

During the next two hours she fell into a troubled doze, then awoke with a start, to find that her hat had been removed and a rug thrown over her. She blessed Marthe for her thoughtful care. Then she went to bed, and slept the dreamless sleep of a tired child until late in the morning.

She drove to Miss String's hotel, and was ushered at once into the presence of the

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great String, who rose to greet her as she entered the pretty sitting-room, and pushed a chair forward, inviting her to sit down as she did so.

"I am so glad you have come," said Miss String, "and suppose we begin our afternoon with a little refreshment. Will you have tea or consommé? They are both here."

"A little consommé, please," answered Louisa.

"Do you know," said Mabelle smilingly, "I was stupid enough to have forgotten which it was you took; so I told them to bring them both."

Louisa smiled politely, but wondering how Miss String could forget a thing she never knew.

"So I thought it best to be on the safe side," continued Mabelle, carefully choosing her words and still smiling in what Louisa could not help thinking was meant to be a fascinating manner.

"It is always better," she assented dryly, and waited for what was to follow. There

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was a short pause. Miss Benner was excited in spite of herself; and Mabelle, too, seemed nervous, for she made a futile search for imaginary hairpins, and blushed like a schoolgirl.

"My dear!" she suddenly exclaimed, "I don't know why I am telling you this—and you must promise not to repeat it to any one yet—but I am going to be married again—to—Mr. Van Cuyp. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Wonderful indeed!" echoed Louisa.

"It seems so extraordinary that I am going to be married again," said Mabelle dreamily; "though, of course—we have to wait until Mr. Van Cuyp is divorced. Now, it seems funny——"

"Horribly funny!" interposed Miss Benner, and laughed immoderately; then paused, for she realized that her conduct must seem strange and unnatural. "I mean," she added more quietly, "I suppose it must seem funny—to you——"

"It does seem funny to me, but not in the humorous sense," said Mabelle, looking

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at her guest curiously, for she wondered what was the matter with her, "that we have to wait until his wife divorces him before we can be married. What did you think I meant?"

"I beg your pardon," answered Louisa, feeling the necessity of pulling herself together; "I am afraid I spoke without realizing what I was saying; it's—a bad habit, I know. Forgive me!"

"Why, of course—it really doesn't matter," said Miss String graciously, "but I didn't know you added absent-mindedness to your undeniable genius and gifts. It's a pity, that's all."

"Yes," replied Louisa humbly, and all at once she knew that the strain and worry of Stephen's absence had been greater than she realized.

"It's all part of the artistic temperament, my dear," said Mabelle soothingly, "so I wouldn't worry. People of your kind are often misunderstood."

"That's true," agreed Louisa, and was silent.

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"Of course, one always regrets a real fault, but there are other and deeper regrets, which go further—things one cannot have—things one has to give up——"

"Yes," urged Louisa gently, for she had been struck by the other's sudden earnestness, and wished to hear what she had to say.

"I was thinking of a regret I have—though that hardly seems the right word, for I've accepted it now," continued Mabelle quietly, "and Mr. Van Cuyp insisted —"

Again she paused, and Louisa wondered why she did so.

"That I must give up the stage!"

"Give up the stage!" echoed Louisa in amazement.

"But I love him," went on Mabelle, not seeming conscious of the interruption; "it made it—easier; it robbed it of its sting, you see."

"What will you do?—Have you told Bies-ter?" asked Miss Benner excitedly.

"Yes," said Miss String, "and, of course, he went on like a lunatic; but I soon showed

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him it had to be settled that way. Now, there's my understudy——"

"She wouldn't be *you*," objected Louisa. "Why," she exclaimed decidedly, "the show would fall flat without you in the lead——"

"That's what Charlie said."

"Well?" inquired Louisa impatiently, when the other paused, as she thought, unnecessarily.

"I suggested a compromise," announced Miss String calmly. "Of course, he swore like a trooper and wouldn't hear of it at first, but—well, I brought him to my way of thinking—I just twisted him round my finger!"

"I told him," Mabelle was saying slowly, "that my understudy should remain the understudy for the part of Pauline, but—that *you* would take my place, absolutely."

"*I!*" cried Louisa faintly; "you told him that?"

She sat there clasping and unclasping her hands, feeling as if she was either going to faint or else have a violent attack of hysteria; but at the same time she seemed

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rooted to the spot and unable to move. Mabelle's next words calmed her.

"If you say yes—and you must say yes," she went on breathlessly, "why, I'll teach you the part."

"I hardly know——" began Louisa. "Please let me think it over—for a minute. It's all so wonderful—so unexpected—I can't seem to comprehend it all. You know how much it would mean to me—do you think I really would make a success of it?"

"Yes, I do," answered Mabelle, and there was a tone in her voice which Louisa knew was sincerity itself.

"Then I'll do it," she exclaimed with sudden decision, and, rising, she offered her hand to Mabelle to seal the compact; but Miss String, giving both her hands, came round the table and, drawing the trembling girl to her, kissed her.

On the way home, Miss Benner heard the newsboys calling out the evening papers. As her carriage was halted for a moment, she made out the news that was being bawled on all sides.

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“Dee-vorce in the 400! First hearing to-morrow! Miss String to be called to the stand! Extry! Dee-vorce suit! Extry!”

Louisa bought a paper and the carriage drove on.

“So that was why Mabelle couldn’t go with me about the contract to-morrow! Heavens! what a price she will have to pay for her happiness! And I—I am to take her place.”

She entered her apartment, after telling the carriage to wait. She must rest for a little while before she went to the theatre. What a wonderfully exciting day it had been; but she sighed as she entered her room, and rang for her maid, for this news about the divorce suit had upset her a good deal. But there were compensations. She had the chance to become a *star* in a single night! It seemed too good to be true! And then she thought how noble it was of Mabelle to give her the opportunity to step into her shoes, for the great String herself had won her fame by hard study and long days of waiting.

CHAPTER XI

STEPHEN PASSES THROUGH A NEW PHASE

STEPHEN was passing through a new phase in his existence, and quite naturally, this was having its effect on his life and character. Unintentionally, he had deceived Louisa when he wrote her he had been absorbed by business affairs. He had neglected to tell her what he had been doing during his mysterious week of absence. Not that he had been engaged in any pursuit of which he was ashamed—but he merely forgot to mention several incidents which would have made Louisa see all the greater necessity for action if she wished to retain her power over him.

Intuitively she felt that Stephen was slipping away from her. If left to his own devices, she might lose him altogether, so, without the benefit of further knowledge on her part, she was preparing to seek a way in which to bind him to her more closely.

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She was first surprised, then annoyed at his absence. Finally she determined that as soon as he returned she must see him. Then would be the time to use all her powers of discernment to see whether she could discover how matters really stood between them. She knew she would have to exercise all her diplomatic cunning to find out what had happened to disturb their relations, and she was well aware that it would not be an easy thing to do.

She made up her mind that she would not seek him nor make the mistake of sending for him, for the situation must come about naturally if she hoped to succeed. It was not difficult to carry out this programme, for her spare time was fully occupied with the study of her new role. It kept her nose to the grindstone, however, for while this extra work was going on, she had to appear every night and in matinees twice a week in her own play; so she found very little time to devote to her private affairs.

True to her promise, Mabelle had given Louisa an hour's coaching each day. The

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matter of the divorce had never been mentioned between them again, and the girl felt it would not be her place to introduce such a subject. Her visits were for the sole purpose of being coached, and she was pleased at the progress made, and at the warm praise Miss String often bestowed; so—there was an end of it.

It was decided that Mabelle should formally retire from the company in three weeks' time; and as she had informed Louisa of this, she supposed the divorce would soon be granted, and gave the matter no further thought.

Louisa accidentally met Stephen in the street one day shortly after his return from Chicago. She playfully reproached him for his neglect of her, and went on to say that nothing but a cup of tea could ever make her forget his cruelty. But she spoke so lightly that Stephen did not detect the real reproach which lay beneath; perhaps it was his embarrassment which helped to blind him to her actual feelings, though, now they were once more face to face, he did not

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show any contrition and certainly no regret.

He had not quite reached the point where their relations would inevitably come to an end. He was socially ambitious, and he had been studying daily to improve himself, ever since his arrival in New York. Louisa palled upon him. Indeed, he had outgrown her and her environment, and he determined to leave her as soon as he consistently could. Then he would be free to live in the more moral, wholesome atmosphere he craved.

Louisa knew from his indifferent greeting that he no longer loved her. He was plainly nervous and ill at ease. He twitched the muscles of his mouth, and he did not meet her eyes freely and candidly as was his habit. Louisa sighed, for she could not understand all that had happened to bring this unhappy state of things about.

How unhappy she was! How she longed for his love, for his caresses, for the renewal of the madness she had scarcely been able to endure before.

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They drifted into Sherry's, and Louisa ordered tea. All this time Stephen maintained a silence that appeared as strange as it was sullen to Louisa, who, however, waited patiently until the waiter had served them and gone away; then as she handed him his tea she said:

"What is it, Stevie? You seem worried!"

"Oh! business——" began Stephen evasively.

"But I thought the hard times were over——" objected Louisa gently.

"Yes," answered Marlowe, "but women do not understand business! Let's talk about something else."

"You are so—different from the old days, dear!" she said softly, with just a shade of reproach in her voice, "that I cannot help thinking——"

"What?" he asked abruptly, as she paused suggestively.

"That—I must have offended you in some way," she said sadly. "If so, I am sorry!"

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This was purely tentative, for she was groping in the dark.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Marlowe; but Louisa was conscious of the effort he was making to speak naturally. "Whatever made you think that?"

"I don't know," she replied, "though I fancied you did not care——"

"For goodness' sake, Louisa," he said quickly, "I hope you are not going to rake me over the coals! I won't stand for that, you know!"

"If I did not know you better, my dear, I should say that that remark was the result of a guilty conscience. But never mind that; listen, Stevie——"

"Well, what?"

"You must realize how strange it seems to me, that you have said nothing, absolutely nothing, about my new plans. Don't you care about—my affairs—any more?"

"Don't be a goose!" laughed Stephen, somewhat harshly. "You mean—er—your new part in the *Dream of Love*? Biester—told me about it—er—last night, and—er—

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I was going to say—how glad I was to hear you had—er—fallen on your feet.”

“I am delighted that you are pleased, Stevie!” said poor Louisa in low tones, “and I am truly glad you said—just—what you did. It’s nice to feel that you haven’t forgotten how much this—means to me!”

Marlowe stared at her, but said nothing.

“I didn’t suppose I’d get so far ahead in so short a time. I’m very lucky, am I not?”

She laughed nervously, but she saw how easy it would be to lead him into the hidden dangers of suspicion, and how necessary it was to avoid these if she hoped to improve the situation.

“Of course I’m pleased,” remarked Stephen, “I’d be a fool not to be!—when I was the one to discover you!”

“I had forgotten,” said the girl quietly; “but I hope you’ve found me a fairly profitable investment——”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I say,” she answered; “you haven’t lost much by me—I hope. You’ve been so generous and kind, that I’ve hardly

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considered the financial question at all—I haven't had to, you see!"

"What are you driving at?" asked Marlowe cynically; "trying to get more money out of me, I guess. Women are—the devil!"

"No, on the contrary—I am saving money," said Louisa, without enthusiasm; "and, if all goes well, I should soon be in a position to pay off the mortgage on my—soul. I've paid you the interest up to date on the loan—but my efforts evidently haven't been appreciated."

"I wish you'd tell me what on earth this is leading up to?"

"I'm afraid I've expressed myself crudely," she replied; "but as you say, women haven't the faintest conception of business——"

"I'd give considerable to know what your game is——"

"Game?" she queried musingly. "That means motive, doesn't it?"

"Yes. What is it?"

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“A woman’s motives!” she echoed dreamily; “does she know them herself?”

“Are you trying to drive me mad?” he asked, with the forced calm that indicated desperation.

“No, nothing is further from my thoughts,” answered Louisa. “I am only trying to tell you how I feel.”

Marlowe said she would have to explain further if she expected him to understand.

“Then listen, Stevie,” she said, “and don’t interrupt. The way I gave myself to you—was brought about by a trick—oh! it wasn’t your fault—Biester lied to me when he told me that I must be—protected if I expected him to take me in as a member of his company. He did it to please you—I can see that now, because he was under financial obligations to you—though he didn’t say you were the only man who—but you were there—and you know the rest. At first, I confess, I shrank from you, not on account of the immorality of it, but because you were—necessary to the life I longed to enter. That’s all done with—accepted now

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—it really doesn't matter—for it's all changed; you have changed, and I—oh! can't you understand? You see, I hated to be coerced—and now I know it was all a falsehood. Still, nothing matters much if only——”

“What?” asked Marlowe hoarsely, for he was under the magic spell of her personality again; “are you trying to recall the past?”

“It's too late for that. You know that as well as I do. But I am only going to ask one favor of you: I want—I want you to take supper—alone with me in the apartment—after my second debut—I mean my debut in the *Dream of Love*. Say yes—I have a reason.”

Louisa covered her eyes with her hand for a moment, and when she looked at him again she was smiling.

“I am grateful,” she said softly, as he told her he would come, and at the gentler note in his voice her heart beat happily. She could expect nothing more yet.

Soon afterwards they made their way out to the street, and there separated—she to go

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to rest, he to write some letters, so he said.

Marlowe met at a dinner, at the house of his lawyer, Van Renssalaer Chubb, a Miss Marjorie Camp. In the course of the evening he learned, quite by accident, that she was not the real daughter of old Israel Camp, but had been adopted, as the couple had no children of their own.

“Adopted!” The word affected him strangely, evoking a flood of bitter memories and yet more wonderful possibilities.

“She is not the daughter of Israel Camp!” he exclaimed excitedly. Then he fell into a brown study.

If she were merely an adopted child, then who had she been—and who were her antecedents? Could she, by any possibility, be the daughter of his dead Linda? Could she be the child he should have been seeking all this time? Had he found her? And could his quest be at an end?

“I beg your pardon,” he remembered saying, “my thoughts have been wool-gathering. Your remark made me forget for a

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moment where I was. Your news is very curious!"

The old gentleman who had given him the information had stared back at him, vaguely surprised, and asked himself why his companion should have found this piece of common knowledge curious. A few moments later the men had left the smoking-room, and Marlowe found himself seated by Marjorie's side.

"What on earth have you been talking about—in there?" she asked banteringly, indicating the direction of the smoking-room.

"Women," he replied, off his guard. "I was talking principally about you to old Schuyler Van Vorst."

"What did he say?" she asked sharply and, as he thought, somewhat suspiciously.

"That you were Queen everywhere and—here!"

Marjorie smiled faintly, but she held her fan against her lips, so Stephen could not see the line of pain they formed.

"Come and see me on Thursday," she said impulsively, with a touch of the imperial

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manner which became her so well; "I have something important to tell you—but not now—not here."

Marlowe noticed her frightened glance. But she smiled back at him naturally, sweetly, and, as he thought, proudly.

A little later he was listening intently to what she was saying.

"I am telling you about myself, Mr. Marlowe, because I have no desire to wear borrowed plumage as if it belonged to me——"

"But I knew already——"

"That I was not really born to all this?" she asked, surprised. "I did not know it myself until six months ago, but there were some business questions that had to be attended to when I came of age, and I had to be told——"

"It was a pity——"

"No, it was inevitable," she replied; "only, I did suffer at first, for I had lived here ever since I was five years old, and it was a shock to find out that I was an—alien after all."

"What do you know about yourself—your real parents?" he asked with suppressed ex-

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citement, feeling that he might be on the right track at last.

"Not much," she answered quietly; "only that my mother died when I was born, and I was brought up by an old nurse——"

"What was your mother's name?" he asked intently.

"Alida——"

"Not—Linda—you are sure?"

"No, Alida—Alida Mason," she answered, wondering at his lack of composure; "but my father is—dead, too."

"Where did you hear all this?" asked Marlowe abruptly; "are you sure it is all true?"

"Yes. Why, from my old Nanna—Jameson; my—mother, you see, told me I might write to her——"

The reaction was too great, and he bowed his head. His quest had led him nowhere. It was strange, though, for the face of Marjorie Camp resembled in a way the dream-face of his fire-maiden; but that, of course, was a mere coincidence, yet it had the effect of drawing him towards the girl, for whom

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he already felt a mysterious attraction.

"What is the matter?" asked Marjorie anxiously; "I hope you are not ill?"

"Oh, no, indeed, only I thought you might be some one I had—heard of—though I must confess now that I have never seen you before."

"Yes?"

"If your mother's name had been—Linda Leigh," he insisted, "I could have sworn—that I—knew—of you," he said breathlessly.

"Who did you think I might have been?"

"The child of—one of my—friends," he answered, and looked down, for he could not bring himself to face those clear eyes of truth with a lie on his lips.

Shortly afterwards he left the house, his heart more than ever filled with rage against Louisa, who had been the innocent means of standing between him and the search he had come to New York to pursue. His feeling for her was almost dead, and if it had not been for the promise he had made to take supper with her, just two weeks off, he would have broken with her now for ever.

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However, she still had the power to fascinate him, when he was with her, and he determined to resist the temptation to visit her by writing and asking when he might come, hoping that she would refuse to see him.

When this proved to be the case—she pleaded press of business—he was irritated; but perhaps—who knows?—this was the result she had intended to produce!

The death of Israel Camp, which followed a sudden mysterious seizure, brought about the departure from America of Marjorie and her mother.

The news of Camp's unexpected death fell like a bomb in Wall Street, where it lay ominously smouldering. There were vague rumors afloat, and a serious reaction in the market seemed imminent. A mild excitement prevailed in the Stock Exchange, where several of the Camp holdings fell off a point or two and the list showed a sign of a general tendency to weaken. Then paragraphs, and even one or two editorials, appeared in the leading dailies and financial newspapers, stating emphatically that the

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financier's death had been due to an attack of apoplexy, whatever malicious rumors had been started to the contrary, and that his estate was fully and ably prepared to meet every one of his outstanding liabilities. This news, persistently reported, was intended to show that these slanderous reports were but the work of the dead man's enemies. A small number still persisted in asserting that the affair was mysterious, but the opinion of the majority, after a brief period of wavering finally prevailed, and the market responded, rallying splendidly at the last hour. The incident had been widely commented upon, but before long it was forgotten. Stephen, however, was to learn the truth at a later date from a totally unexpected and most surprising source.

Marlowe left cards for the two bereaved ladies, and before they sailed he had a short note from Mrs. Camp, telling him that they were going abroad, and it was more than probable they would never return to America.

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Twelve o'clock, midnight, the hour for supper, had struck, and Marlowe, punctual to the minute, opened the door to Louisa's apartment. He was ushered into the drawing-room by a strange butler. This seemed to annoy him, although he did not know why. A moment later Louisa entered.

"Stevie!" she cried joyously, and then drew back in astonishment, "won't you tell me how I did to-night?"

"You had Mabelle String beaten to a frazzle!" he said, trying to speak casually; "but—do we eat?—that's what I want to know."

"Dear!" answered Louisa patiently, "I think I hear the servants bringing the table now—"

"I hope that that grinning ape—," began Stephen surlily, but the door from the hall opening at this moment interrupted him, and a table was brought in by Marthe and the new man-servant.

"You see I am to be butler and cook combined," she said, indicating the tray on

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which, among other things, was a chafing dish.

“Rather fancifully fixed up for a cook, eh?” suggested Marlowe, as he struggled against a growing admiration for the dainty, alluring woman standing near him, with a lingering look of appeal in her lovely eyes.

“This is my night out—and so I have all my regalia on,” she answered, trying to match her mood to his, which seemed to be most capricious. “But come! to the table, as Marthe says; I have the hunger of a—wolf!”

Stephen told her several bits of gossip, while the lobster was being deftly prepared by Louisa: Van Cuyp, he said, had offered no defense to the charges of his wife, and that Mabelle had announced that they were to be married by a Baptist minister in Jersey City the very day the divorce was granted.

“It seems—a pity—to have so much publicity and comment!” was all that Louisa said, for she recognized the necessity of coaxing Stephen back to his usual form, if she expected to succeed in marking this passing hour with a white stone.

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The meal came to a peaceful close, thanks to Louisa's tact, and after Marlowe had finished his second cigarette, he carefully extinguished it before he pushed back his chair preparatory to leaving.

"That was great! and the wine very—superior!" he said, with the air of a man who was completely satisfied; and then he rose, looking at his watch. "But it is late and I must go!"

Louisa sat motionless as she felt an airy kiss on her brow. She heard his retreating steps move in the direction of the door, and still she did not change her position. It was not until she heard the handle of the door creak softly that she spoke—quickly, and in a low, vibrating, compelling tone.

"Stevie—don't go!" and the woman wept as he turned and, after a moment of indecision, came swiftly to her. She knew then that for the time being she had won!

CHAPTER XII

LOUISA CAPTURES A LONDON AUDIENCE

IT was in the spring, some few weeks later, that Miss Benner and the *Dream of Love* company departed for England to play a six weeks' engagement at one of Biester's London playhouses.

The s.s. *Adriatic* sailed at noon, and it so happened that at the same hour Mabelle String, the former star, was united in marriage to Stanley Van Cuyp, her former lawyer, the divorce having been made absolute only half an hour before the ceremony which made these two man and wife took place.

In the florid words of our friends of the press, "when the great leviathan steamed away from her new million-dollar steel pier, bound for foreign though friendly shores," Stephen Marlowe waved a purely perfunctory farewell to the new star of the theatrical

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world, who had "gone to gather fresh laurels abroad," and, turning homewards, breathed a sigh of relief as at the cessation of a burden which had grown hateful. But the woman continued to gaze through tear-stained, dim eyes at the shore where Marlowe was, as long as she could see it; for she knew now that he had cast her off indeed, and for the first time came the certainty that she loved him with that love that comes but once in the lives of men and women.

Alas! the knowledge had come too late, for after their last meeting she had seen but little of him. He had come to see her off, but it was not until then that she saw that he no longer loved her, and she realized that she could never rekindle his passion. A passion dead, a romance buried—and she had gone to her cabin to weep out her grief alone.

Marlowe, after he had reached his hotel, sat down to write to Eliza Manson, the old nurse who had been with poor Linda when she died, and who had cared for the child.

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“Dear Eliza,”—he wrote—“can you give me any clue as to the whereabouts of my daughter? If you will consent to do so, it will be for her good, as I am a rich man now and wish to make up to the innocent living for my sin to the dead——

“Yours faithfully,

“STEPHEN MARLOWE.”

Once having written in this wise, it was characteristic of the man to wait patiently for the reply. Perhaps this was in a measure due to the fact that, being relieved of the oppression which Louisa's presence and the consequent obligations it entailed had brought about, he could now with more freedom subject himself to a rigid self-analysis.

His short acquaintance with Marjorie had also been a factor in the awakening of his dormant conscience—at least, in so far as it showed him the necessity for looking present facts in the face, facts which he realized must be solved.

He did not spare himself, but began at the beginning, by contemplating his initial

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sin in its direct relation to Linda, and indirectly the degree of responsibility it involved in regard to the child he had never seen.

His conscience told him, that as between Linda and himself, his sin had been the greater; yes, he had been entirely to blame.

He had endured untold hardships for a number of years in order to equip himself for a search which, in the absence of a clue must inevitably begin from a perfectly indefinite starting point—in this case New York, a spot chosen for no other reason than that of sentiment.

After having suffered privations for so long, he delayed his search in order to amuse himself, as thousands of other and wiser men might have done, by indulging in the many pleasures which a great metropolis has to offer.

He realized now that he had overdone it, but, at this moment, when he knew that his passion for Louisa Benner had burned itself out, he looked upon it as an unfortunate incident, which had come to an end.

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It was so much time lost, and he was ashamed of the power the woman had exercised over him; but how great this influence had been he did not realize until he was freed from its baneful control.

He thought that the predominant note of his reflections was one of repentance, but the fact that he allowed so many elements of self-excuse to enter into his calculations gave it more the character of remorse.

Marlowe was a man of forceful personality, strong desires, and considerable self-control. He was naturally inclined to the æsthetic in his attitude to life and its various relations. It was this last quality that made him take so naturally to the refinements of life. His ideals were high, and he meant to realize them all.

Stephen was honestly trying to find the solution of a difficult problem; and in order to do this he was using the best means he saw according to his lights.

The answer to his letter came at last, and ran as follows:

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“STEPHEN MARLOWE: I was surprised to hear from you, just over twenty years after my poor Linda died. I will not tell you where her child is, except that the last time I heard from her she wrote from foreign parts. God grant you may never find her, for you bring evil to all you come in contact with! The curses of an old woman will follow you to the grave! I hope never to have the ill luck again of having you cross my path, and in closing I trust that the great Reaper shall mow you down soon, so that the world may be rid, without delay, of a viper which can do nothing but bring and do evil. May you suffer for your sin and a thousand times seventy times seven, even as the innocent have and must always suffer through you.

“(Signed) ELIZA MANSON.”

Stephen tore this note into small pieces savagely, and threw them into the fire. What an old hypocrite the woman was! For had she not insisted upon following Linda into exile, as she herself called it? So how

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could she possibly criticize or blame him? Besides, it was fate, and not his fault, all that had happened. Why could not some one have spoken the last time he had gone away, and warned him? If they had, he would not have gone, and if he had not done so his father would not have required his care and attention until he had died and released him from further responsibility. He had returned to his love when it was too late.

Marlowe pulled himself together with an effort, for he had been on the point of dwelling on the memory of his mother, the sweet vision that still had power to draw his heart-strings tighter—and busied himself with the reading of some business papers that required his immediate attention.

Meantime, Miss Benner was within sight of England, and she dreaded to take up her life again.

When she did think of Stephen, she wondered if he ever thought of her. No, that could not be, for he must have already forgotten her.

The *Adriatic* was to arrive at four o'clock,

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and Louisa, with the rest, was on deck watching for her first glimpse of England; but her attitude was listless, and her expression denoted neither interest nor pleasure in the prospect which caused such wild excitement in a group of chorus girls standing near by.

One of her hands rested lightly on the rail, while the other hung a dead weight at her side; she did not appear to see the thin line of coast which was becoming more clearly visible every minute. The prattle of the girls jarred on her, for she could not avoid hearing what they said, their voices being high-pitched and nasal.

Louisa turned abruptly and walked towards her cabin.

After what seemed an interminable period of waiting, the passengers who were going to London were duly landed at Plymouth, and Louisa, with the others, found herself on English soil at last. The girl, looking rather white as she stood by her maid's side, begged that she might be al-

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lowed to sit down somewhere, as she felt dizzy.

“That’s the effect of the sea,” said Marthe soothingly; “it’ll pass away in a day or two—you’ll have to lose your sea legs, that’s all.”

“But when does the train start?” asked Louisa, who felt ill; “I would like to get into it soon—now, if I could.”

Marthe, good soul that she was, seeing that her mistress needed rest, did not waste time in asking tiresome questions, but had her soon placed in a carriage where the guard promised that they should be alone. When they reached London, Miss Benner felt much better, as she had slept most of the way.

It was due to Marthe’s tactful ministrations that she was enabled on the following evening to take London by storm, for all the newspapers were unanimous in heralding the arrival and unrivaled success of the new American prima donna.

On the morning of the fifteenth day since landing in England, she determined to take

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her courage in both hands and have a tentative conversation with Marthe.

She did not arrive at this decision without enduring much anguish of spirit, much self-communion; but she was alone, suffering, and—she admitted the fact grudgingly—wretchedly unhappy.

Louisa believed that Marthe was to be trusted. She certainly had proven herself capable in so many unexpected ways, that she had succeeded in making Louisa believe that she could not get along without her. Marthe listened most attentively to all her mistress had to say, and comforted her as best she could.

The picture of her former friend Mary standing at the foot of the altar just after the ceremony had simultaneously flashed before her eyes, together with the stern face of Stephen, and under the inspiration of the first vision she wondered if Stephen would come to her if she needed him. The time had not arrived when she would plead with him to return to her, to comfort and soothe her.

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Miss Benner rose very late and breakfasted on a cup of tea and a small piece of dry toast; nevertheless, it made her look at life in general and her own life in particular from a totally different standpoint.

“Marthe,” she said as her hair was being dressed, “I am not—I——”

“Mademoiselle,” ventured Marthe discreetly, “seems better.”

Louisa met Marthe’s eyes in the mirror and frowned slightly.

“I mean—will soon be better,” corrected Marthe suavely.

“But—suppose I am not better—what is to be done?”

“I should advise seeing a doctor, Mademoiselle.”

“No, that would be useless. I am not ill—I am only tired.”

“Ah! yes, Mademoiselle, you are overtired, that’s all. It is easy to see that you are overworked. You must get a good rest—that is all you need, and then you will see things differently.”

“How good you are, Marthe!” sighed

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Louisa fervently, "but you are wrong. A rest will do me no good. I am too far gone for that. Sometimes, I think I must be dying——"

"Pardon, Mademoiselle! I am discreet—you must not mind what I say. You are in love, but you must not let that love become the stronger. It is your art that must prevail. You must fight and conquer this love. You must use every endeavor to forget the past, and look only to the future. It is a moment of weakness; it will pass. Ah! you do not belong to yourself—you are the mistress of art, and you cannot afford to loiter by the way—you shall think alone of the fame that some day will be yours. That is best!"

The day passed somehow, and at the appointed time Miss Benner made her way as usual to the theatre.

Before she went on, Marthe insisted that she should take a small glass of dry champagne, and the girl had not the strength to refuse.

She acted her part like one in a dream, and the first act came to an end. With a

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sigh of relief Louisa retired to her dressing-room to prepare for the second act.

The reaction came, and Louisa pressed her fingers to her aching eyeballs to keep the tears back. The inevitable had happened. She had fallen in love with Stephen. Such love she had never known before. It was all-absorbing and overwhelming. Her strength was being sorely overtaxed by the fight she was making. She must endure—until to-morrow. The evening would pass, and to-morrow she would give up her part. It was a cruel decision to come to, for her art had meant so much to her. At first it had been paramount, until this wonderful love had supplanted it. She rose to her feet and looked long and feverishly at her reflection in the mirror. She was ghastly white in spite of her make-up, so she hastily put on more rouge. A knock at the door startled her, but she crossed the room hastily and went out.

The moment had come! She could no longer delay. Perhaps it would not be so bad, after all. She made her entrance. Her

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knees shook under her, but, with a tremendous effort of will, she conquered her weakness; for the minute her old form returned to her. She smiled with all her usual confidence and charm. Then the opening bars of the famous dance sounded in the orchestra. She took up her position, but suddenly her heart began to beat quickly, and, as she began to move slowly, a feeling of suffocation seized her. The house, as she saw it in a second of time, wavered and swam, as a dark curtain descended; she tried to scream, though no sound came, lurched forward, caught herself, and fell back unconscious into the arms of the tenor, who was waiting his cue to join in the dance.

The curtain was rung down while she was carried out to her dressing-room, and when it went up again, Miss Claussen had taken her place, they were as like as two peas—and the play proceeded. The audience settled down, hardly knowing what had happened, and applauded, screamed, went mad, in fact, for in their opinion Louise Benner was surpassing herself.

CHAPTER XIII

SOCIETY RECEIVES

STEPHEN MARLOWE found himself in the painful position of a man who is unable to make up his mind. He could not but realize that he was in very much the same position as he had been upon his arrival in New York only a few months ago. His purpose had been made unstable by a pair of alluring, irresistible eyes. He tried hard to forget them, but he could not.

If he put off his departure for a week or so, it could change the situation but little, if at all; and perhaps he might pick up a clue here in New York which could be followed up either in England or on the Continent if by chance it should lead there.

That it must lead to foreign parts was a necessity, as Eliza Manson had given him so much to go on; but to work that clue up he must have something more definite to add

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to it, otherwise his work would be all in vain.

It almost seemed as if mere chance would bring him to the goal he sought, and why should not chance show him the way right here in New York as well as abroad?

Marlowe finally decided to stay on for a week or two, believing something important might be discovered as to his daughter's whereabouts, and this decision somewhat relieved the tension of his mind; though if he had stopped to consider it, the situation remained unchanged.

Clearly, it was more satisfactory to decide to lengthen his stay in New York for the present, and perhaps something would turn up in the meantime which might put him on the track of his quest; there was always a possibility of that happening if it came unexpectedly from a clear sky, though the probability of such an event taking place seemed unlikely or doubtful in the uncertain light of present conditions.

Stephen now turned his attention to his mail, which contained a miscellaneous col-

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lection of bills, circulars, and so forth, several private notes, which were, in fact, invitations to dinners, balls, musicales, and a multitude of cards for afternoon teas, for Van Renssalaer Chubb had induced Marlowe to get out of his shell.

Chubb being a gentleman in the strictest sense of the word, a man of refinement and education, possessed the open sesame to most New York houses where it was considered necessary to be invited, if one wished to be thought in the swim; and this, not by the new criterion of commercial prestige where wealth was the key that unlocked the doors of the favored mansions, but by right of inheritance; so that any one to whom he stood as a social sponsor was certain to have no difficulty in going where he wished.

Stephen, to do him justice, had no ambition from a purely worldly point of view; so when he opened his first letter and saw that a Mrs. Osborn Wright requested the pleasure of his company at dinner on the following evening at eight-thirty this abso-

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lutely made no impression upon him, nor did he know that many people would have given their eye-teeth to be able to accept such a coveted invitation.

He wrote a note, dictated from a form that Chubb had given him, of acceptance—because he thought Chubb might be offended if he did not do so, that was all; the rest of the notes of invitation he accepted or regretted at random, more with the idea of practicing the forms that Chubb had suggested than for any other reason.

He thought the dinner the next evening might be amusing, and remembered that some one had told him the lady had one of the best *chefs* in town; so he ought to get a good dinner if all else failed. Besides, Chubb had shown such a kindly interest in him, that it would be folly to wound his feelings in any way.

It would have made very little difference to him if he had known that he was invited to fill the place of another man who had given out at the last hour; also that it would be said behind his back by certain ill-natured

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people that Chubb had threatened to give away one of the pet secrets of the Wright family if his choice were refused—because Chubb, being the family lawyer of more than one influential family, had failed to smile on these backbiting, disgruntled people who wanted to enroll themselves among the favored few, so that in revenge they retaliated in this cheap way, by suggesting that Chubb bought his favors, and so forth; but that this was nonsense was proved by the fact that these unfortunate people did not know their old colonial or modern New York.

Marlowe was too unsophisticated to know about all these wheels within wheels, and, if he had been cognizant of them, he would have laughed; not believing such a thing could have been said in all seriousness; for he did not realize that many there be who take their social pleasures with all solemnity and the pomp of a religious rite, instead of getting all the enjoyment they can derive from them.

He dressed with unusual care the follow-

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ing evening; he was relieved when he arrived at the handsome house in Seventy-fifth Street to find that he was not by any means the last guest. He greeted his hostess with just the proper amount of regret that he might be late, and then stepped aside to make way for the next arrival, an elaborately dressed lady whose advent created quite a stir, for she had the reputation of being the brightest woman in New York.

Marlowe looked about the dainty Louis XV. drawing-room with much interest, though he knew nothing of periods or details of periods, nevertheless, he was innately conscious of the sensuous beauty and color of its general scheme.

He fell into a deep reverie, his mind soothed by the happy blending of delicate shades, and it was not until he heard his hostess' voice addressing him that he turned towards her. She was accompanied by the richly dressed woman whose entrance had caused more than the ordinary ripple of excitement a few minutes ago.

"Mr. Marlowe," Mrs. Wright was saying,

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“this is a great friend of mine—Mrs. Leslie James. Will you take her in to dinner?”

Stephen murmured something unintelligible, and, as dinner was announced at this moment by a solemn-faced butler, Stephen offered the lady his arm, and they joined the others who were making their way to the dining-room beyond.

“I think it better to start fair and square, Mr. Marlowe,” remarked Mrs. James as they entered the other room, which was finished in oak, with a wonderful series of panels in red Italian damask, said to have been bought directly from a church; “so I’m going to tell you all about myself, and, in return for my frankness, you must relate to me all you care to about yourself.”

“I’m a newcomer to New York,” answered Stephen, as they seated themselves at the long table which groaned under its weight of silver, relieved by a mass of liberally disposed roses that shone resplendent above the napery and plate, “and it would be a real help to me, provided it don’t put you to any inconvenience.”

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Mrs. James smiled politely at his quaint words, as she unfolded her napkin.

"I'm not a widow," she said, with a certain air of inconsequence, "for I suppose you've been trying to place me; but the fact is, my husband and I—not having the same tastes and being totally unsuited to each other—have agreed to live apart."

"Yes, I see," answered Stephen, feeling that it must be his duty to fill in any gaps and pauses that might occur.

"Of course we meet occasionally—in public," remarked Carla James casually; "and it goes without saying that we are always courteous to each other—it would be bad form otherwise, though sometimes I've felt that he—overdoes it."

This remark seemed to be purely impersonal and did not appear to call for any comment on his part, so he merely waited for her to continue.

"He has his friends, artistic and literary," she volunteered presently, "and I have mine. Perhaps you did not know that he writes for the magazines—and does it rather well,

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I believe—so it means a very good arrangement of our affairs. I live for and in the world—it's much more amusing than being clever in the other way; don't you think so?"

"I don't really know," said Stephen, as he struggled with a wonderful concoction of caviare which he was not at all certain he was managing correctly. "I don't know much about books, and a very little of the world."

"The former is easily acquired if you have any taste for it," said Mrs. James; "but—the world, the world is a very complex game. Here, in this town, it consists in having an unlimited number of counters called money, and the ability or courage to spend them. We are bounded on the north by a species of new vulgarity, ostentatious but amusing; on the south by respectability; on the east by poverty, degrading and heartrending; on the west by dazzling splendor, tempered by a certain amount of originality—and that, my dear man, is a rapid up-to-date sketch in black and white of our dear old hateful, torn-up, fascinating metropolis. But I

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wouldn't have it changed—no, not one jot, for I love it all; I breathe better in its commercial air, and I can exist only amid its dashing, glaring, gaudy garishness. And, I hope I've got many years still to live in it before I die—after a few more visits to Paris, *bien entendu*.”

“I've never thought of it in that way,” said Stephen, vaguely amused. “But to go back to what you were saying a few minutes ago—I mean about living apart from your husband——”

“I know what you are going to ask,” and she caught him up deftly, laughing lightly as she did so; “you want to know why I didn't get a divorce?”

“Why, yes,” answered Marlowe, surprised, “I believe I did; but how on earth did you guess that?”

“It was obvious,” she replied, “and the logical sequence of what went before. I didn't get a divorce,” she pursued blandly, “because I didn't have a reason; I don't mean cause—that's a horse of another color.”

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“What do you mean?” exclaimed Stephen, in some consternation, for he was not yet sufficiently instructed in the niceties of the social shibboleth to read her distinction clearly.

“Reason means wanting to marry some one else,” she explained promptly; “cause—oh, well, you know what that means. I see you do, and I didn’t care to go into it, or make it easy for him to form a new alliance——”

“Divorces are very common nowadays?” inquired Stephen naively.

“Quite,” agreed Carla meditatively; “but it’s often due to lack of self-control, and more often—because of the reason I’ve just given.”

He saw more clearly that the class he was mingling with had a general code of manners and morals; also that the whole social fabric was woven of tiny threads which were not easy to pick up, but which, if one hoped to enter the sacred portals, must not be treated as of no account. One must learn to know the rules in order to play the game,

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and then know when to break them; that, surely must require a considerable amount of finesse, keen judgment, as well as a good deal of courage, too. His final conclusion was that one should be, above all things, genuine.

“The great difficulty with our system of entertaining,” remarked Carla, putting down her menu-card which she had been studying, “is that we have a comparatively small number of men belonging to the leisure class. I see you don’t realize how many difficulties that fact offers. Let me explain. Men are never available until dinner-time. Up to almost that hour they are immersed in business. When the business day ends, the social side begins, and it is their valets who transform them into society men—for a few hours only; then they scuttle to cover like rabbits, and the days, each one like its fellow, succeed and follow the nights in rotation.”

“Isn’t that rather crude and—morbid?” asked Stephen.

“No; for men are not creatures of impulse

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like women—they have no initiative, Mr. Marlowe,” said Mrs. James, nodding her head gravely to emphasize her cadencies; “they are creatures of habit. Alone and unsupported, they wouldn’t dare to deviate by a hair’s-breadth from the prescribed path, I can tell you. Men are a good deal like sheep, too, in many ways; they herd in offices, they nibble at bits of information, they gambol in an atmosphere of commercialism, and they feed in the middle of the day—together, but not with us. That’s very important. Later, they prefer bridge at the club instead of seeing women. Ah, men are becoming sexless and absorbed—I don’t know what we are coming to——”

“But I don’t see——” began Marlow argumentatively, when Mrs. James broke in excitedly:

“How one is going to change the system?” she asked; “how are we going to bring it to pass that men are to be led into the fold and taught to see that women don’t want mere machines who have no ideas beyond business or violent sport—who, when

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they become gentlemen for a few hours each night, are too tired to exert themselves, too exhausted to sit up at the table without the stimulus of—drink? Oh, the pity of it. But I tell you, it's the fault of the women as much as the men. Automobiles and the society of modern sporting women have a great deal to do with it. The women too are gradually allowing themselves to become unsexed. The men find very little charm in their society, and the system—the tendency of the times is all wrong, I tell you."

"Your picture is decidedly impressionistic," remarked Stephen; "you are slapping on your colours too vigorously to make it possible to leave much to the imagination. Surely it is crude, ugly, banal——"

"No, it is true," answered Mrs. James with her usual vigour; "I wish it weren't. I should like to form a society which should have as its fundamental object the improvement of the race of young men and—women," she added, apparently as an after-thought.

"Why don't you do it?" asked Marlowe,

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laughing; "it might be amusing—and it might be the tender shoot from which would spring a new order of things."

Carla checked his levity by a gesture and a faint smile, for she had not finished her observations on her fellow men and women.

"I am really in earnest," she urged with some force, "and if you only knew what a relief it is to be listened to. Why, we have been discussing this excellent dinner intelligently. Usually the man next to me smiles at me fatuously and stupidly before he goes to sleep—now don't bow in that silly way—and I shriek at the flowers, which nod back solemnly as if they understood, while I give an utterly false impression to my hostess that I am enjoying myself."

"I can't believe," said Stephen, laying down his knife and fork when she paused, apparently out of breath, "that you are so much of either an iconoclast or a social butterfly as you seem to be. I wonder if you haven't a heart—a large heart hidden beneath your worldly veneer——"

"My poor, dear fellow," she exclaimed,

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looking up at him contritely, "I have been selfish. You want your innings now—you want to put my listening powers to the test—you want to talk about yourself. You see, I read Marie Corelli's latest eye-opener the other day, and, do you know, it made me glad that she and Mr. Roosevelt never married. Just imagine the result of the big stick and the Carrie Nation principles the Corelli carries out against society. My efforts would be nowhere. But go on—it's your turn, and I really want to hear what you have to say."

Marlowe, before he replied, gave a tentative glance at the young girl seated on his other side. Mrs. James, seeing the direction his thoughts were taking him, caught his eye on the rebound.

"Don't bother about them," she said, leaning forward and speaking confidentially; "it's a very bad case. It is generally believed that they are already engaged or about to be, and they say—she is a suffragette, while he is an example of the sort of a man I have

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been describing. She doesn't expect anything from you—please go on."

"You must realize that I did not come to New York merely to amuse myself. I don't deny that I have sipped nectar"—really, Stephen was improving marvellously—"and tasted of forbidden fruit, but I had another reason, and it was for that I came. My object was to fulfill a sacred trust made to the dead. I—promised a man who is—dead, that I would try to find his—child, whom he had never seen, and make up to her for a—sin of long ago. The—man was my friend; the woman—I knew also. I have wasted time and I don't know where to look, for I have no clue except that the—child, who must be a woman grown by this time, has gone abroad. I don't know why I am telling you—this, but I felt as if I could trust you. Have I done wrong? What ought I to do?" Then, feeling her eyes upon him, he turned a white face to her.

"Pull yourself together, Mr. Marlowe," she said in low tones "remember you are in the world. You made no mistake in trust-

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ing me—I have been thinking what to advise; I can't think what to say yet. Give me time. You told your story very well—it is a real romance. You wouldn't think I had so much sentiment in me, would you? But, dear Mr. Marlowe, you can have confidence in me, and I must tell you that I know whose was the sin—forgive me, but I cannot deceive you. And the child—it is very noble of you to wish to expiate your fault—it happened so long ago, and yet you remember—you have never lost hope or wavered—you have never once receded from your purpose.”

‘How good you are,’ exclaimed Stephen softly; ‘I do trust you from the bottom of my heart, and—I place myself in your hands. What must I do? If you could tell me that, I should be cheered, uplifted; but I fear there is nothing to say, nothing to suggest, nothing to do——’

‘Only this,’ she returned gently. ‘You have heard that women often know by intuition what they cannot explain in any other way. Well, it is true. I know that

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some knowledge of your daughter will come to you—it will come to you by chance alone, but it will surely come. What will happen then I cannot say—but you will find your daughter, that is certain; don't ask me how I know—but you will find her—you will find her," and her voice sank almost to a whisper, passionate, vibrating and pulsating with a strange power that brought a new hope to fulness in the man's heart.

"Thank you," he said; and as the hostess rose at this moment the tension between them lessened. She laid her arm on his, and in silence they made their way out of the room in company with the rest.

But a bond existed, and must ever exist between these two, and Carla, in token of that bond, smiled as he bowed and left her.

Marlowe left at a comparatively early hour. He longed to be alone so that he could review the situation calmly, dispassionately, and at leisure.

He confessed that when she had said that chance would bring him and his daughter together, he was not unduly affected by her

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words, as the idea was not a novel one to him.

It was her assertion that his search would come to a successful termination, which first produced a deeper impression; then when she had reiterated this idea more strongly he had believed her against his better judgment, though her statement had been based, as she had confessed, on the mysterious action of some obscure feminine mental process. Even now he doubted, and at the same time wondered, if there could be any possible chance of his quest turning out as she had been so positive it would.

That night, after he had dismissed Jenkins, he lit a long cigar and deliberated as he smoked late into the night.

Clearly, he could expect no mere chance to put him on the track of his offspring here in New York; three months, nearly four, had passed, and, though he had made no move, to be sure, nothing had transpired. However, if chance were to guide him, it would make very little difference whether he had acted or done nothing; for as he could

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not control such a vague element as chance one way or the other, it could not possibly enter into his calculations as a determining factor.

He might as well go away. Yes, he would not remain in New York any longer. He would go abroad. He had never yet been outside his own country, so he would go to London, and perhaps the ghost of chance would go too.

He was rather pleased with the idea of going abroad. And it was more than pleasurable to feel that he could indulge himself in almost anything that money could buy. Yes, he would close the flat in Thirty-fifth Street, have his own things packed, give up his rooms at the hotel, and sail for England, at the end of the week. Jenkins could attend to all these matters in the morning. Then he doubted as to whether it was wise to carry out his plans. Perhaps, after all, it might be better to sleep on the matter. That would be wiser.

He tried to compose himself, but at first he was restless and disturbed; gradually,

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however, wearied of trying to solve a problem which gave him a different result each time, he relaxed, until little by little his eyes closed, and he fell into the deep, dreamless sleep of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER XIV

STEPHEN GIVES A BALL

THE travail of the night brought forth a definite and final decision to sail for England as soon as Stephen could make the necessary arrangements to do so. He therefore gave explicit orders to his servant as to the necessary packing of clothes, books, and various odds and ends, the closing of the apartment in Thirty-fifth Street, and also told him to notify the manager of the hotel that he would give up his rooms as soon as he found out when he could secure a berth on one of the steamers of the White Star line sailing within the next ten days or two weeks.

“It almost seems as if we were leaving for good and all,” began Jenkins, smiling at the multiplicity of orders his master was giving him; but he checked his exuberance of spirits when Marlowe glanced at him—

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sharply—he knew what that peculiar expression meant by this time.

“As soon as I find out about the date of sailing,” pursued Stephen, “just write for rooms at the Ritz in London—a sitting-room, bedroom, and bath, and, of course, a room for yourself.”

“Very good, sir; anything else, sir?” inquired Jenkins deferentially.

“No,” answered Marlowe curtly, “you may go,” and he immediately turned his attention to a pile of correspondence on his desk. He paid the bills he found there waiting to be settled, accepted all the invitations for the following week, and glanced over the rest of the variegated collection, which was composed of begging letters, advertisements and circulars, disposing of the lot in short order.

This ended, Marlowe drummed on the desk until, struck by an inspiration, he took off the receiver of the telephone at his elbow and called up Chubb. He had decided to give a party, but he wished to consult his

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friend about it first, as he wanted Chubb to attend to the details.

The affair was talked of for many a day as one of the most brilliant and successful parties given in New York for some time.

Two days later Stephen sailed for London. On the way over, as he paced the decks in storm or sunshine, his mind was full of but one thought, the search for his daughter. He had neglected his duty long enough, and now he meant to pursue it until he found her, or was forced to acknowledge himself beaten.

He mentally developed plans of discovering her whereabouts, and found himself at a standstill.

His schemes were, for the most part, intangible and visionary, as they must needs be, for he had nothing definite, nothing practical to guide him, no one to consult.

Chance, that was too vague, too utterly hopeless. Well, well, he was nearing land—to-morrow night he should arrive in London. The day after to-morrow, if all went

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well, he would start out and systematically begin the search.

The morning after his arrival in London, having a letter of introduction to his banker to deliver, he set out in a hansom for Old Broad Street.

He arrived at the bank, told the hansom to wait, and in due course of time was admitted to the presence of the man he had come to see.

Stephen came out at length, and was about to make his way directly to the street, when he turned toward the desk on which the book of visitors lay open.

At last he moved away with a sigh; it was utterly hopeless and futile to expect help to come in this way, for he did not even know his child's name, unless it might be Leigh, and there was no such name as that to be found, or indeed anything like it.

Marlowe visited other banks, a few house agencies, but no information was to be gleaned; so he paid off his cabby, and stopped at one of the larger restaurants for luncheon.

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The room was filled with people, mostly women.

From where he was sitting he could not see the whole room, as the restaurant was crowded, though he had had apparently no difficulty in finding a table, being alone; he had been put by himself, so to speak—shut out from the crowd by a mass of palms—for it was the last of the smaller tables left, though he had not realized this when he had been shown to it.

A woman entered, turned almost immediately when she saw that no place was left, and walked away. Marlowe did not see her face, for he did not look up until she had begun to move away; nor did he notice that another lady stood in the background. It was only after they had gone that he realized that there was something vaguely familiar about the way the women moved, and he had caught a fleeting glance of a younger woman who followed in the wake of the other.

They both retired, disappearing into the obscurity of the maze of people, and were

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soon lost to view as they seated themselves at the extreme end of the vast room, hidden by a screen that led into the servants' passage-way to the kitchen.

He laughed quietly as he began his lunch, for the younger of the two women—now he knew it—had reminded him in a vague way of Majorie; but it could not be they, as he had heard before he left home that someone had seen them in Paris and had written home to that effect. How absurd to think that it could have been they,—though now he remembered that both ladies had been dressed in mourning, still everyone dressed in mourning could not be—It was ridiculous; and besides he had positive knowledge that they were not in London. It was curious that he should have thought of Majorie, for there was no reason why he should; but he soon forgot all about the incident, for his luncheon was excellent and he was very hungry.

In the afternoon he took a drive in the Park, which amused him, though it looked rather dreary in its winter dress; dropped in

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for tea somewhere, and then returned to the Ritz about six o'clock. He rang for Jenkins, who got him into his dressing-gown. After ringing for a whiskey-and-soda, Stephen thought he might go to the play to-night. That was a good idea; after six days on the sea, he needed a change.

When the drink was brought to him, he sent his servant to find out what plays were being given, and to try to get him a seat; he wanted to be entertained, so he instructed his man not to get a ticket for any but the best and most amusing show.

After he had finished his drink, he settled himself back in a long, easy chair, and closed his eyes, as he thought, for an instant. When he opened them and looked up with a start, Jenkins stood there, smiling apologetically.

"I knocked twice, sir," he said, "and then I came in."

"I must have forgotten myself for a moment; that isn't like me—to do a silly thing like that," remarked Marlowe sleepily and

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rubbing his eyes. "I must," he yawned, "be beginning to break up."

"I never knew you to do it before, sir—" said Jenkins.

"And I hope I'll not do it again in a hurry," said Marlowe, blinking. "I feel all done up. What did you get?"

"Sir—" began Jenkins, looking down at the ticket he held, and fingering it awkwardly in his embarrassment, "I've done the best I could—I couldn't do better—and they assured me it was by far the most amusing piece, so—I got a stall, sir; at the S—— Avenue Theatre. They are giving—the—*Dream of Love*——"

Marlowe glanced sharply at his servant, and then looked away.

"No, that's amusing, I guess," he said easily, "and I told you to get the best. Jenkins—is the cast—the same?"

"Yes, I asked if it was the American company that was playing, and they say Miss Benner is——"

"Out of sight, I suppose," interrupted Stephen. "Yes, she's clever, fast enough."

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“She’s more than that, sir,” responded Jenkins, “they say she’s the whole show——”

“Just draw me a bath, will you?” went on Stephen, as if he were bored, “I’ll dress.”

“Very good, sir. Hot or cold, sir?”

“Tepid,” he said curtly.

Jenkins disappeared into the bathroom. He didn’t like to hear that harsh tone in his master’s voice, and stood rather in awe of it.

Marlowe, meantime was indulging in day-dreams. He wondered if Jenkins had noticed anything out of the ordinary in his manner when Louisa’s name was mentioned. Stephen himself had experienced an indescribable sensation at the time, something resembling the feeling known as goose-flesh, or the mental shrinking which the mention of a ghost produces in some people of sensitive temperaments, but had quickly recovered himself. It was natural to pause abruptly at the mention, at the sudden introduction, of the name of one to whom he had been bound by the strongest of all passions: it was also natural to be able

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to throw off the eerie sensation that had momentarily taken possession of him, when he realized that the roses of that brief period had turned to ashes.

He had no fear—he saw that at once—of facing again the woman he loved, for he knew, that he could look into her eyes without the faintest degree of emotion.

If there was the slightest doubt, even in the back of his mind, the test of being confronted with his former enchantress would be an amusing one; that it was nothing more, the absence of any emotion on his part proved.

Jenkins came in and told him his bath was ready. He arose and went into the bathroom.

He was still thinking of Louisa. He owed the woman nothing; but would it not be better to pay down a fixed sum and bring the old affair to an end? That must be decided, thought over. That he did not make up his mind at once might seem as if there were some smouldering embers of passion still left—but he felt sure that this was not

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so. And he dismissed the subject from his mind.

It had been curious how he had connected Majorie and her legal mother, Mrs. Camp, with the two ladies he had caught a fleeting glimpse of in the restaurant, especially as he knew almost to a certainty they were not in London. He wished he did know where they were. It would be pleasant to see them again. His short acquaintance with them had given him an entirely different view of life, and the fact that Majorie had hinted very plainly that she wished to be married, for no other reason than that she desired a name which she could call her own, had not surprised him, nor had he thought it unmaidenly; it seemed then, as now, a perfectly natural and human longing.

It did not find any answering chord in himself, for the simple reason that he had not been in love with her; nor would she have spoken out her thoughts so freely if she had had the remotest conception of the probability of such a thing.

At times he thought of her, curiously

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enough, in the character of his fire-maiden. This was not altogether strange, for the two faces had many points of resemblance; yet if each were analysed in detail and side by side, there would be seen many essential differences, though there certainly was a subtle similarity between them.

He sighed, and his line of thought shifted. He dwelt on the subject of his daughter, and again he wondered how he should set about finding her.

If there were only someone he could consult, someone who would give him some practical advice, or offer him some suggestion he could follow out in a tangible way, he would be only too thankful. But there seemed to be no one he dared to ask.

He had begun to think that his path of discovery had ended in a blind alley. There was no way out except by retracing his steps, and that would be to acknowledge himself beaten; he was not prepared to accept defeat yet, hopeless as the situation appeared.

He came out of the bathroom and sat

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down to have his valet put on his socks.

"I think I will have those—" he said, and hesitated.

"Shoes, sir?" inquired the man, looking up, but not at his master.

"Yes," answered Stephen, with a twinkle in his eye, "but we call them low shoes at home."

"Quite so, sir—thank you, sir."

Marlowe stared at the top of the man's head as he knelt at his feet, finishing his work, and suddenly he frowned, for he decided to do something quite out of the ordinary. Why not consult his servant? He had always wished to do so. Even now, he hardly knew how to begin, indeed, he dared not even make a start. He had learned enough about the ways of English servants to realize that they are and must be considered in the light of mere machines; and deviation from the ordinary routine might be misunderstood, and—well, it might be a mistake. One error of that kind, and the authority of the master would be at an end; but—the present case seemed to warrant a

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departure from the usual methods of procedure, and it might be the means of putting him on the right track for the first time.

The great difficulty was to find a proper and natural opening, and, after his shoes had been laced, he determined to rest for a few minutes, until his courage had risen sufficiently to make it possible for him to speak.

He proceeded with his toilet leisurely, asking questions and making observations at random—not with the object of seeking information, but rather with the idea of finding some means of leading up to the subject nearest his heart.

“What must I do if I get into a row with a cabby?” he asked, not knowing that later on the information his servant was about to give him would stand him in good stead.

“If you can’t settle with the man amicably,” answered Jenkins, smoothing his master’s hair at the back, “and he shows signs of being disagreeable in order to get the better of you, it is always better to request

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him to drive to the nearest police station."

"What good would, that do? why, he would be a fool to go."

"I don't see for why. He is forced to go," said Jenkins. "The dispute would be settled there, and the rights of the matter decided on."

"But—is it on the square—final?" again asked Stephen, trying with infinite pains to fasten his collar.

"Oh,—yes, sir," replied Jenkins, deftly buttoning the recalcitrant collar with a small fastener, "it's fair and it's final. I remember, sir, a gentleman, an American gentleman, was going to the City from the West End—it's a two-shilling fare, as the gentleman knew; but, sir, out of kindness he gave the driver a half-crown. It being too much, the cabby made a fuss and demanded more. At the police station the magistrate found in favour of the fare, sir, but told him he had made a mistake in overpaying the cabby——"

"And the cabby?" asked Stephen.

"Oh, he was fined ten bob and costs,"

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answered Jenkins. "I beg your pardon, sir," he added, "may I pull your braces up a bit?—your trousers are a trifle long."

"Braces. Oh, you mean—suspenders, I guess; at least, that's what we call them on our side of the pond. But what ought I to do if I get into a tight place—I ain't talking about sus—I mean braces—police business and that sort of game?"

"If you are hard put?" remarked the valet, standing off to see that the dress-coat hung to his satisfaction, and pulling it there, or patting it gently, "the best thing is to ask a bobby——"

"A what?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, I should say a—policeman," and Jenkins coughed apologetically.

"Well, I'm d—d," was the trite observation that Marlowe made. And then; "You know a good deal about London, I suppose, besides English customs; I wonder if you could help me?"

"I should be glad to do what I could, sir—certainly—thank you, sir."

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"I believe you, my lad," exclaimed Stephen warmly. Now, listen. I came to London to look up the daughter of a friend. The mother is dead, and I'm afraid the union wasn't strictly carried out according to Hoyle; you see? The name of the woman was Linda Leigh, and the father—well, he don't want his name known—he's playing the dark-house game, has never seen the girl, and—she should be about twenty-two years old by this time. . . Now, how can I ever hope to find her with only that to go on? I wish—people—would hunt up their own kids, and—what?"

Stephen had turned away as he was concluding his sentences, but, hearing a noise, wheeled about suddenly

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," exclaimed Jenkins contritely; "it was my awkwardness. I dropped your brush. There's only one way to find that gell—you'll have to advertise."

"Advertise?"

"Yes, sir, for if she's in these parts she'll see it, and send an answer."

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"I'm afraid that would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack——"

"No, sir," insisted Jenkins. "You let me put a proper advertisement, say, in the *Times*, the Paris edition of the *New York Herald*—that's widely read; or—I have it—in Lloyd's weekly paper; they've made some wonderful discoveries in their time."

"I should say for ten days or two weeks," suggested Marlowe, sitting down at a desk, drawing a sheet of paper toward him, and dipping a pen meditatively in the ink-well.

"Of course, you may trust me to be discreet, sir, about this matter——"

"I should hope so. Remember, not a word to anyone, and I won't have my name appear. I know I can't stop your gabbing about it if you have a mind to——"

"Sir, I said you might have confidence in me," said Jenkins, with quiet dignity, "and sir, I meant it."

"All right, my lad, that's all right; but hold your horses for a minute, and I'll tell you what I think I will do—just wait until

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I get it down. If this fails I don't suppose there's anything to be done—eh?"

"Absolutely nothing as I know of."

Marlowe's pen scratched busily for the next few minutes; then he threw it down, blotted the half sheet on which he had been writing, and handed the paper to his servant.

"There," he said, "read that aloud—I want to hear how it sounds; and if it's O. K., just attend to this matter as soon as possible."

"‘If this should meet the eye of the daughter of Linda Leigh,’ prefaced Jenkins with a faint cough, “‘she will hear something to her advantage by writing immediately to Hartleigh Green, K.C., 17 Carlisle Street, London, England. Said daughter was born about twenty-two years ago in a small cabin eight miles from the village of B——, in the State of Connecticut, U. S. A.’”

"If you think that will do," said Marlowe, rising, "just leave my things ready for me. That is all. You may go."

"Thank you, sir," murmured Jenkins, as

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he pocketed the paper. "Same time in the morning, sir?"

"Yes," answered Stephen absent-mindedly; and then, correcting himself, "or, no, I'll ring when I want you."

"Good night, sir."

"Good night," answered Stephen, turning away abruptly as the door closed softly, to pace the room excitedly several times before he too went out on his way to dinner and to the play.

He asked himself many times where and under what conditions he should find his child, if he was ever really destined to meet her. And yet he never for a moment lost courage. When Stephen Marlowe once made up his mind to do a certain thing, he bent all his energies to the accomplishment of it.

He breathed more easily as he found himself among his fellow-beings, and he was glad he had decided to go to the theatre. He sadly needed some amusement and recreation.

CHAPTER XV

MARLOWE MAKES A NEW FRIEND

A WEEK had passed since Stephen went to the play, and he was still in a quandary. During the performance of *The Dream of Love*, he felt as if he were a criminal suspected of a horrible crime, who is about to be subjected to the supreme test.

When the curtain fell on the last act, Marlowe breathed a sigh of relief as he rose from his seat. He had not once felt a return of the old thrill—in fact, it was as if he never before had seen this once familiar face; yet he left the playhouse strangely dissatisfied, and, curiously enough, he could not understand the cause of this unaccustomed sensation.

It was almost as if there were some mystery, something unexplained, unfinished—though those eyes, those wells of truth, as he had been wont to call them in the old

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days, had met his own without flinching or a glance of self-consciousness. There seemed, however, a lack of finality in the situation that puzzled him, though the failure of the test should have convinced him that his passion for her was dead at last, and that the girl, from her manner and lack of recognition, tacitly accepted it as such. It was very curious! He could not understand it.

Two weeks passed, and still no answer from the advertisement. He consulted Jenkins, who tried to console him by saying that once, after seven years, a reply to an advertisement had turned up; but he was depressed to the last point when an unexpected surprise came, in the arrival of Mrs. Wright and Mrs. James.

Stephen welcomed this change, for lately he was becoming morbid. And he felt that only traveling would lift him out of himself. He seemed utterly unable to dispel the gloom, and continually reviewing the entire situation, he inevitably took an abnormal and distorted view of the existing condition of his affairs.

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Mrs. Wright would introduce a new element into his life, while Mrs. James understood him so well, it was not surprising that he looked forward to again meeting them with a feeling of pleasure and relief. He was anxious to be taken out of himself, and he knew they would be able to do it.

He wondered whether he should send up his card and let them know he was stopping in the same hotel; or should he wait until they discovered him? He did not know which was customary, but decided to wait—at least until they were settled, for they had only arrived the night before.

He did not see them during the day, but, coming in late to dinner, he caught sight of them sitting at a table just finishing their meal. After mutual greetings, Mrs. Wright asked him to supper with them after the play, they dined early so that, as Mrs. Wright said, they could be in the theatre when the curtain went up; she was old-fashioned enough to hate to miss that.

Stephen was glad enough to accept, and the ladies, after exchanging a few pleasan-

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tries with him, left for their evening's amusement.

What a delightful meeting it had been, brief as it was! How eager he was to renew those moments of intimacy with Mrs. James! for during the hasty conversation he had not been able to address a word to her, as Mrs. Wright had monopolized everything and held the centre of the stage; but he had caught, nevertheless, an echo of the old friendly spirit in her companion's eye and expression, which made him realize more than ever what a steadfast friend she might be, and how sympathetic and genuine she really was.

Platonic friendship! He could very easily imagine such a delightful relationship becoming established between them, to their mutual advantage. It would certainly be a help to him to feel that the unselfish companionship of a woman like Carla James might possibly be his, a woman who was sincere, a good friend, and a woman of the world. Hermy Wright could never be anything more than a stimulant, healthy, invig-

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orating, but never lasting, never the same, never as satisfying as the other.

He was shown to his table, and decided to make his dinner last as long as possible, so as to pass the time, and put in the rest of the evening at one of the music-halls.

At a few minutes before ten o'clock, having dawdled away as much time as he had at his disposal, he drained the last drop of his coffee, paid his bill, and went out.

He dropped in at the "Empire" just as Colette La Touche, the barefoot dancer, was executing the first of her graceful poses to the accompaniment of some classic measure, the intermission just having ended; listened to the clever imitations of Cecile Rivers, who took off most of the famous actresses of the day, and then, looking at his watch, saw that he would be late for supper if he did not hurry off now.

He waited at the back of the house to watch some wonderful balancing feat before he pushed his way out to the street and hailed a hansom. His spirits rose when he

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thought that soon he would be again in the society of his friends.

On his arrival at the Ritz, however, he found he was ahead of time, so after he had sent his hat and coat to his room, he sat down to wait for them. He chose a seat in the main hall on one of the divans, and watched the arrivals for supper.

A funny little man, wearing his glasses balanced almost on the end of his nose, bustled in, nearly bowling over one of the attendants, who stood in his way, smiled, apologized, then for the first time, aware of his mistake, glared at the man as he gave up his hat and cape, snatched his check from him and turned away, once more wearing a conventional set smile which he held in readiness to greet the lady he was to meet and sup with.

Presently she arrived, fresh, artificially rosy, dressed in a wonderful creation, from rue Taitbout, and having, as Stephen thought, Paris written all over it; she was *decolleté* too, and wore a hat, a wonderful thing of gold lace and ostrich feathers. She

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was stared at, and commented upon by more than one person in the lounge. She seemed entirely unconscious of the effect she was making, and, as her escort came mincing forward, Marlowe caught the greeting of the old roué, "*Bon soir, petite, t'es en retard,*" and her reply "Pardon, Altesse—" and the rest of the sentence was lost as they moved off in the direction of the supper-room.

Couples entered, men, groups of women, and, after an interminable interval, Marlowe caught sight of Carla James. She saw him almost at the same moment, and waved gayly at him with her fan. Behind came Mrs. Wright and a young man, dark, perfectly dressed, with soft brown eyes, something like those of a Newfoundland puppy, and a shock of hair plastered across his white forehead. He was, as Stephen learned afterward, Lord Hughes-Tempest. At present he considered him merely in the light of a fourth, whose coming made the chance of a *tete-a-tete* with Carla more possible.

He had no reason afterward to change his

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opinion of the young man, who, he perceived at once was merely a fashion-plate who possessed a few stock phrases, and very little else. But Hermy Wright evidently found him absorbing. Later on, the general conversation subsided and dwindled into confidences between the two couples, being finally carried on, as far as Carla and Stephen were concerned, in low tones.

Marlowe, having dined so heartily, was not hungry, but the hot, dry air of the music-hall had made him thirsty, and he swallowed two glasses of champagne before he could manage to speak easily and comfortably.

"We went to see *The Dream of Love*; really, Louise Benner is—wonderful! exclaimed Mrs. Wright, as she helped herself to caviar.

"But you'd seen the show in New York before you came over?" asked Stephen, surprised.

"No, curiously enough I hadn't," answered Mrs. Wright, looking across at him with one of her direct, frank glances which

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made him lower his eyes; "it's awfully good, and Miss Benner——"

"Oh! she's ripping!" said Hubert Hughes-Tempest, his words falling over one another with the force of an explosion, and then laughed immoderately.

"Yes, she's clever," remarked Stephen, quietly; "but I saw her—before I left America."

"Fancy!" burst forth Hubert, who removed his monocle to scrutinize Marlowe more attentively, though he himself was not conscious of having said anything extraordinary.

"Can you see better or worse with that piece of glass in your eye?" asked Stephen mischievously; "better I think, or you wouldn't—wear it, eh?"

"Rath—er!" answered Hughes-Tempest, appearing to glare at Stephen from his eyeglass, which he had replaced. "I'm farsighted, don't you see? and quite blind without it."

"I've often wondered how on earth you keep it in," drawled Carla lazily, "though,

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of course, I never liked to speak of it—I didn't know whether you'd like it or not. Isn't it horribly hard to learn? I'd much prefer a lorgnette."

"Easiest thing in the world—'pon honour. What?" answered Lord Hughes-Tempest meditatively, and then after a pause, "fancy me with a lorgnette! I'd be jolly well chaffed at the Club if I—I say, though, you're jollyin' me? No?—really, now, aren't you?"

"No, indeed," said Stephen earnestly, but with a twinkle in his eye which was lost on the Englishman, "we really want to know."

"I see," replied Hubert, very seriously. "Well, I will say it was most awfully tryin' at first; but I kept on, even in the face of the most exasperatin' difficulties, and now I never think of it at all—what?"

The ladies laughed.

"I'm glad to have seen Miss Benner," said Hermy, reverting enthusiastically to her first thought. "I have heard so much about her——"

"What have you heard?" asked Stephen,

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with a subtle change of tone, which, however, no one noticed, except Carla, and she wisely gave no sign.

“Only that she was awfully good,” continued she; “but I had no idea——”

“Oh! she’s rippin’——” broke in Hubert, with all the freshness of a new thought, and just as if he was not at all conscious that he had said the same thing before.

“Yes,” said Stephen absent-mindedly, “she is a very clever actress.” He too, had evidently forgotten that he had voiced the same sentiment before. He laughed, and there was a nervous touch to it which Carla alone perceived; but again she was silent, keeping her counsel.

The conversation still remained general, Mrs. Wright dominating it, with exclamations or observations which were in the nature of asides, for no one listened to them except Hughes-Tempest, Mrs. James laughed, did her share when Hermy paused for breath, but Stephen, who was less of the world and consequently less used to exercising self-control, grew more and more silent.

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He drank champagne freely, to brace himself up, and strangely enough, it did not seem to go to his head, but instead produced a spirit of exaltation that was destined to find an outlet sooner or later.

"Let us have coffee upstairs in the sitting-room," Hermy suggested; "it would be so much more cosy—that's American for comfy, Hubert; what do you say?"

"Right-oh!" agreed Hubert, to whom the question seemed to have been addressed; "if you've paid your shot, let's be off!"

"You naughty, ill-bred boy!" exclaimed Hermy, "you ought to offer to pay——"

"Oh! come, I say——" said Hubert laughing, "I thought you were puttin' up to-night——"

"You English are incorrigible!" cried Mrs. Wright.

"Don't you," she asked, as he looked over the bill that was presented to her before signing it, "ever consider women in any other light than to pander to your pleasure?"

"I say, Mrs. Wright," he exclaimed re-

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proachfully, as they rose to go, "you *are* rough on a chap. Whatever do you mean?"

"I was only joking, dear boy," she quibbled weakly; "don't worry your poor head about it."

Ten minutes later the four were in Mrs. Wright's sitting-room, which she shared with Carla James. Coffee and liqueurs were brought in by a waiter, who looked, as Mrs. James afterward remarked, "white and trembling with fatigue—to the bone, my dear."

"Poor man!" she said, as she poured herself out a cup of coffee; "I believe they are on their feet from all hours in the morning until all hours in the night——"

"Fudge!" exclaimed Hughes-Tempest with unconcealed contempt, "they get time off every day, and I hear they do them awfully well here: what?"

"Have a cigarette, Huby?" inquired Mrs. Wright, puffing at one herself and tossing the box across to him, "but don't talk rot!"

Stephen drank his coffee slowly and

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meditatively, topping off with a pony of brandy; then he walked over and sat down by Carla's side.

The others were sitting on another sofa in the opposite corner of the room, and were already engaged in a conversation that promised to be endless; so the low-toned words and confidences carried on between Stephen and Carla were not liable to be interrupted.

"I really haven't had a chance to talk to you before," said Carla softly; "have you any news to tell me? You don't know how interested I was by what you have already told me—have you nothing to report?"

"Nothing definite," answered Stephen, as he rose to put his cup down beside hers on a table near by; "but I can tell you what I have done, which is not much."

"Everything counts," suggested Mrs. James softly, "so go ahead and confess."

Stephen told her all that he had done, beginning with the examination of the visitors' books at the various banks, and how futile that had proved. "And then by my

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servant's advice," he went on, "I advertised——"

"That's an excellent idea—I never would have thought of that!" said Carla, shifting her position so as to face Stephen. In what paper did you advertise?"

"The *Times*," replied he wearily, "and I believe in the Paris edition of the *New York Herald*—oh! and in a weekly paper I'd never heard of before—*Lloyd's*."

"I've heard of it, and I believe it's supposed to be very reliable," said Carla, as she lit a cigarette and settled back comfortably on her cushions. "And what then?"

"Well, I've heard nothing further of the matter," answered Stephen quietly, "and I don't believe I ever will."

"You dare to say that after all I've done for you?" said Mrs. James mock-seriously. "I don't believe you have ever had a particle of faith in me from the beginning."

"It isn't fair to say that, my dear Mrs. James, when you know I appreciate all you have done for me——"

"You evidently don't believe in my occult

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powers," suggested Carla mischievously, "or else you wouldn't be talking in that hopeless, depressed way."

The wine he had been drinking had given him a new courage, and the coffee and brandy had steadied his nerves, or else he would never have had the moral strength to speak out his secret thoughts to the woman sitting beside him.

"I've something to say to you; I think—I hope—you will understand," he began, "but you said something about confessing a few minutes ago, and—I think you can help me to settle matters with my conscience; at least—oh! I don't know what I mean—I've made an awful mess of my life! You don't know—you can't imagine what it means to me to be received on terms of equality by you and your—friend; it helps me to feel that I may be able to get my self-respect back some day, after all——"

"I see it's quite time for me to take a hand," broke in Carla; you are desperate and—morbid. Don't you know that when

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things get very bad it's a sure sign that they are going to improve? Now I want you to tell me what is troubling you, freely and fully, and if I can help you in any way I shall be only too glad. Remember, too, that I am a woman of the world, and—I shall understand."

"I almost feel that you have an idea of what I am going to say——"

"I—believe I—have."

"But how?" he asked in consternation.

"It wasn't so difficult as you think," she answered gently. You remember you made me some confidences—some of them were only half confidences—and you merely glossed over those, which made me wonder why you did so. You gave them apparently as an afterthought; but to me they had the same force as a postscript in a woman's letter, so—I had reason to believe they might be important——"

"To what are you referring—especially?" He was hoping against hope that she might be on the right track, for if she was, it would make his task easier.

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“To the idea which your casual mention of having tasted forbidden fruit set in motion,” she said, passing her black feather fan through her tapering fingers. “You laid the least stress on that fact; so, being a woman, and having a woman’s way of looking at things, I put two and two together in my foolish, silly way, and felt you were not telling me the whole truth. Am I wrong?”

“No,” he answered shortly, “you are not; but—it is magical!”

“I knew there must be a woman in the case—I knew that almost at once,” admitted Carla, “and I couldn’t help wondering who she might be; it was only human for me to do that. I don’t suppose I ever should have heard if you—hadn’t told me yourself to-night——”

“I—how? Why you must be a wizard!” I said nothing—absolutely nothing.”

“You didn’t tell me in so many words,” she said, raising her eyebrows as if in excuse for her frankness, “but when we were speaking of a certain actress——”

“You mean Miss Benner?” and his colour

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changed ever so slightly. "Yes, it is true. She was—under my protection for three or four months. It is all—over now, though; but hear me out! What I am going to say is—God's truth. She was tricked, and by her manager. He was my friend, and, believing he was serving me, he had the face to tell the girl she would have to have a 'friend' before she could hope to get a position in his show. Wasn't it a low trick to play on the girl, because what could she do but believe him? She was entirely inexperienced, and I think what she hated most was the fact that I was considered necessary—those were her own words—and was thrown at her head—literally. . . . She suffered, but accepted me as a necessary evil until my passion had cooled; then she awoke to the truth that she loved me, when—it was too late. I saw it at the end, but I didn't care by that time, and I never let her know that I knew. I realize that, as before, in that other case you know of, I am the greater sinner—and, dear Mrs. James, what I want to know is, do you consider me only

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a beast after all? Wait a minute! Can I regain my self-respect? Will the fact that I am repentant militate in my favour, and what do you think?"

Carla James was silent, and her head sank forward as she thought deeply, though her hands were folded loosely in her lap. She had fought her battle, and she had come out of it unscathed.

"I am afraid I can't think any the worse of you, Mr. Marlowe," she said slowly, "for you are really no worse than a thousand other men of your kind. The situation is to be deplored—don't think I am countenancing or excusing your conduct,—though the fact that you are not only willing to put your sin behind you, but have the courage to look back at it, makes me think that you have a fighting chance. Think it over carefully, and answer my question: are you willing and able to take it?"

"Yes," he said, after a short pause, "before God I am."

"Then," she said, giving him her hand bravely, though her eyes were bright with

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unshed tears, "there is no reason why you should not succeed. I like you, Mr. Marlowe, principally because you are honest and fearless—it was no easy task for you to have opened your heart to me—and I want you to win. But liking is not—loving. Remember that, and be warned in time."

"Dear Mrs. James, I hardly think you need have said that," exclaimed Stephen, with a light laugh; "I respect you, but you forgot that I only understand one kind of love——"

Carla James laughed lightly.

"Oh! you absolutely refreshing man!" she cried, as soon as she could speak, "you couldn't have said anything that proved more conclusively your youth and inexperience. Now, mark my words—and you may believe me or not, as you please—after you have found your daughter—oh! yes, you will—some women will wish to marry you. Why, you're only a young man still, and——"

"No," objected Stephen, rising, "there you are wrong. I am quite certain I shall

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never marry. I have lived and loved, so there's an end of it. I must say good-night, as I am afraid it's frightfully late and Mrs. Wright will never ask me again. By the way, whenever you want to dine anywhere, you, and any of your friends, please call on me; and now before I go I must thank you with my whole heart for your kindness to me."

"Nonsense!" she said, as she gave him her hand, "I did nothing that a friend would not have done——"

"My dear madam, it is hard to know one's friends, but I know you for a woman with a heart of gold, one woman in a thousand, and my—friend, for you have made a man of me."

"Thank you, Mr. Marlowe," she answered simply, for she was touched by the sincerity of his words, "and—good night!"

Stephen crossed the room, bade Mrs. Wright good night, and made his way to his own apartment.

Carla lit another cigarette and smoked thoughtfully for a few minutes, then, after

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Hughes-Tempest had gone, she rose and came across to her friend, saying:

“Dear—this is no time for compliments. It is the hour of truth. I am tired to death and I am going to bed.”

“So am I,” answered Hermy, yawning; “I found Hubert more than usually dull to-night. I feel more certain than ever that he is a young man without—promise. I wonder if I really mean that—but Stephen Marlowe——”

“Oh! he,” interrupted Carla gently, “is a dear——”

“What on earth were you and he talking about?” asked Hermy sleepily, as they left the room; “you seemed as thick as thieves. I am sure you were hatching some plot——”

“On the contrary,” said Carla, as she laughed inconsequently; “he was telling me the history of his life——”

“How unutterably dull!” exclaimed Mrs. Wright, yawning again; “men have so little originality nowadays! I don’t believe Hubert was so bad after all, but you, my poor angel, must have been bored to death.”

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Carla's only answer was a huge yawn, which she turned into a light laugh as she entered her room and again called out good-night. What did it matter what her friend thought about—Marlowe? What did anything matter at this hour? Lord! how tired she was!

CHAPTER XVI

BIESTER ASKS A QUESTION

STEPHEN saw a good deal of the two ladies during the following week, but usually in the evening, when they dined at some restaurant, and several times went to the theatre afterward.

In the mornings he generally strolled about the neighborhood, looking in at shop windows or watching the smart equipages sweep by, and the life of the town in general. The afternoons he spent in sight-seeing. And so the time passed pleasantly enough.

One morning, remembering that he wished to look up a solicitor in the City, of whom Chubb had spoken, he asked a policeman to direct him how to get to the address written down in his pocket-book.

"The best, cheapest, and quickest is by the Tube from the Circus, sir," said the man

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politely, pointing down the street as he spoke, "to Lane Station."

Marlowe thanked him and walked on. He had no particular business with the solicitor, one Lumley Soames, who had his chambers in Clifford's Inn in Chancery Lane, except to make his acquaintance.

Soon afterward, he reached Holborn. In walking through Chancery Lane, he was very much impressed with the imposing pile of historic Lincoln's Inn.

After some difficulty, he discovered a door bearing the name of "H. Lumley Soames, Solicitor;" so he opened the door and went in.

The diminutive Soames was seated at a desk, a large law-book lying open before him.

Marlowe handed him his visiting card, and mentioned Mr. Chubb's name. Mr. Soames half rose, bowed, and waved Marlowe to a chair.

"I thought I'd just drop in," said Marlowe, looking about him curiously, "nothing

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special on hand now, but I'm a rich man and I might need advice later on."

The solicitor bowed, and the bow was a shade lower this time. He assured his client that he was willing and ready at all times to serve his interests.

After a short business talk, Marlowe took his leave, being ushered to and bowed out of the door by the little solicitor with considerable ceremony.

Turning to the right, Stephen found himself in a little side-street, which happened to be Cursitor Street. He did not realize that he had absent-mindedly turned into it until he reached the intersection of Fetter Lane. Here he asked a passerby to direct him to the Strand, hoping that he could return home that way. He was told to continue to the right down Fetter Lane, and he would come to Fleet Street in a few minutes. Then he could take a 'bus.

He hailed a passing 'bus, and was lucky enough to find a vacant seat beside the driver.

The driver talked incessantly, much to the

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amusement of Stephen, and he determined to go about more often in 'busses; someone, he remembered, had told him it was the best way to see London. He looked about him. The town appeared suddenly in a new guise. The picture of the West End that he knew, faded, and in its place another, unfamiliar London arose.

The driver droned on, asking questions and answering them himself, which made it no strain for Stephen to listen. He had, in fact, been paying very little attention for the past few minutes.

"On Fleet, we left the hold city of London be'ind," the man was saying, pointing back over the route they had come with his whip, "and this 'ere's Westminster. Temple Bar, which used to stand back there, to my mind divides the rich from the poor. They're a poor lot, them hunemployed—and the swells—why shouldn't they henjoy themselves? Arnser me that! Garn! I knew what yer goin' to sy—why, in corse they ought. What's money for but to give a

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bloke a tidy time, eh?—bly'me, say h'i, and charnce it!"

This was so much in accordance with his thoughts that Stephen laughed heartily.

"The Strand, sir," went on the driver, grinning, "the gryte hartery between the City and the West Hend. Somerset 'ouse and Wellington Street! hoffices of the *Paost*, the mornin' noospyper—down there, Haldwych! — the gyetu theatre — Noe Strand 'otel—Covink Garding markitt, to the north—to the south, the Hadelphi quarter nymed with streets after four brothers—'delphi theatre—parding, sir, wish to stop? Oh! ay—seen a friend—suttingly, sir,—thank you, sir!"

The 'bus stopped, and Marlowe jumped out hurriedly, for he had seen Biester, who had recognized him and stopped. Just the man he wished to see! Biester, for his part, had a question to put to his friend, too.

Stephen came up and shook hands heartily with Biester.

"Where on earth did you come from?" he

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asked; "the last time I heard from you, you were sailing for home."

"I got here two days ago," said Charlie, surprised. "Haven't you seen my ads in the papers? They aren't all theatrical—I thought you might have read them. 'Mr. Biester buys a dog,' or 'Charles K. Biester goes ballooning'; say, Steve! you know I'm a great believer in keeping myself and my phiz before the pub. It all helps—everything does!"

"You are a wonder!" said Stephen, without enthusiasm, as they walked on toward Charing Cross.

"Occasionally I get sick or something," continued the manager thoughtfully; "that's all business, though, along with the rest."

"Yes, I guess that's so," agreed Stephen dryly; "what are you going to do now—are you busy or what?"

"My Gawd! I'm never quiet, except when I'm asleep. As a matter of fact, I haven't much doing until four to-day—so as it's getting on to one o'clock, let's go and get a bite somewhere."

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The two set off at a brisker pace, crossing Trafalgar Square, then up Pall Mall, past the Haymarket to St. James' Street, then after another turn, they were soon seated in one of Biester's favorite restaurants.

Biester was greeted warmly by the head waiter.

"Monsieur Beestaire! a thousand welcomes," he said, with his obsequious smile; "but I heard you had been ill—a little *Du-bonnet*, perhaps; it is *aperitif* and very fortifying—"

The little man bustled off and returned himself to serve the liquor.

Biester glanced at his friend in a way that gave him to understand that this man at any rate read the papers and kept himself posted.

"Jules is a good soul," he said aloud, after the man had gone to fetch the bill-of-fare, "and always looks after me well. Now what will you have to eat?" he went on, as he held the card to the light.

"This is my treat, but—you order. I don't much care what I have."

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"No," objected Biester, "we'll 'dutch' if you like, but—oh! well, if you insist."

"Call it for old times' sake," said Stephen, and the manager nodding his head, ordered the meal, helped out by shrewd suggestions from the wily Jules.

Despite the fact that the fare was good, the wine perfection, and the occasion one of cheer, there was evidently an effort on the part of the two men to make conversation, as if some barrier of reserve had sprang up between them. He wanted to ask Marlowe if he knew where Miss Benner was. . . . But he did not know how to begin. He had heard rumours that the affair was no longer on the same footing as before, but he did not want to make the mistake of being too hasty. Everything depended on not putting himself in a false position.

He had had the supreme effrontery to continue to advertise Miss Claussen as Louise Benner, and so far the ruse had been successful. How long he could carry out this deception he could not tell. Some one might begin to talk; a whispered word

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would be enough, and he wished he could find out where the girl was. Biester was perfectly aware that he was all-powerful in his profession, but there are some wrongs that even the greatest dare not attempt. Discovery now would be fatal. Stephen might know where she was. Here, possibly, was help at hand, but he was afraid to avail himself of it. After luncheon would be time enough.

On the evening that Louise had been taken ill, it had been very cleverly and quickly managed.

In an incredibly short time Miss Claussen appeared.

Biester had whispered a word or two in her ear, and the girl, realizing the exigency of the situation, had replied audibly that she was all right and would go on again. The stage-hand had been standing close by and had heard what she had said; but did he suspect—could he, if he did, give the whole thing away?

It was a situation he had to endure calmly least he arouse the faintest shadow of sus-

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picion, for suspicion would mean destruction and ruin. But it was beginning to work on his nerves. It would be more comfortable, and certainly safer to bring it to an end.

By a curious coincidence, Stephen also wished to ask for information concerning Miss Benner. He could not understand the indefinable sensation she had made on him the last time he had seen her, and hoped Biester might be able to clear up the mystery.

He did not want to ask where she was. But he did want to learn what had happened to change her personality so completely.

What was it that had made her regard him as a stranger?

The constraint between the two had been increasing rather than diminishing, and, though Stephen was unaware of it, Biester had been watching him closely.

Both men were conscious of the reserve, and both wished to bridge it, but neither

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dared. Both seemed either afraid or diffident.

Biester was the first to have the courage to break the tension, even if his remarks were somewhat forced. He made an effort to converse, but Stephen, who was growing more and more absorbed, did not seem to notice anything out of the ordinary.

"The French certainly have the happy hand with their cookery; I'm always struck by it, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Stephen, and was silent.

"Aren't you well, Steve?" asked Biester, with a well-simulated appearance of anxiety; "you don't seem to have any appetite. Do have something more——"

"Thank you, no."

"You see I'm such an all-fired busy chap," said Charlie, with a touch of weariness in his tone, for he was beginning to find his task irksome, "that it's a relief to let my mind rest a piece——"

"I should think you'd get worn out at times——"

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"Dog-tired, Steve. It does me good to talk to you—you won't give me away, will you? Old friendship game, with slow music, would prevent that, eh? I knew it. You're a good fellow, Steve. Say! just listen to what I have on hand. Fannie Dreffler opening here to-morrow night—that's one thing; three of my shows playing here; a new show next week in New York—I've got to be there for that; a translation of a French play to look over—where was I? Laffan to see—Ethel, but she never gives me a moment's uneasiness; arrangements to close with a couple of English stars; and I guess that's about all, but it's enough and to spare. It isn't as if it was all easy and smooth—nothing works out at first as you expect it will—but I don't know the word fail—so I've got to work it all out mostly myself, you see. Then I'm sure it's right."

Biester, who had been talking against time, stopped abruptly, for he saw that his companion was not paying the slightest attention to what he was saying.

But he had gone too far to draw back.

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What would Stephen do, and how would he take it if he had really broken with Louisa? That was what bothered him, but he supposed it could not be helped.

“Say, Steve,—listen: I have something important to ask you——”

“Say ahead, then,” answered Marlowe, looking at Biester for the first time with interest.

“I wanted—to ask you what had become of—Miss—Benner?”

Stephen gasped, but looked back fixedly at Biester.

“What *do* you mean?” he asked breathlessly, shading his eyes with one hand as if the light hurt them. But he knew, even before the answer was given.

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. WRIGHT GIVES A TEA

MRS. WRIGHT came in at half-past three and rang for her maid. Orders were given for tea to be served in the sitting-room at four o'clock and a fire lit there. Then she was dressed in her most fetching gown.

Mrs. Wright loved form and ceremony. She did not understand simplicity of detail at all. It was quite natural for her to take an extended view of things, and to form her perspective by means of a lavish display of totally unnecessary details.

Her nature was kindly but superficial, and this made her a good friend, but not such a satisfactory and whole-souled one as Mrs. James. One was absolutely straightforward and simple, while the other loved circuitous byways to the goal toward which both were striving. It was these mutual characteristics that made Marlowe confess

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to Mrs. James that she would make the better builder, while her friend would probably be the better architect, provided she had a great deal of money to spend; and Carla had understood.

At five minutes to four she entered the drawing-room to see that all was as she liked it. The tray and its appointments were the best the hotel could provide, and sufficient confections were sent up to feed an army. Mrs. Wright had not only carefully ordered every detail, but loved it—though instead of a large party, only two ladies were expected, Mrs. Leila Van Cuyp and her friend, the Honourable Mrs. Vereker, Laura Allington's sister, that excellent woman who had stood by and helped Leila through all her recent trials.

Laura despatched Mrs. Van Cuyp to London to be cared for, during the first month of her trouble, by the younger sister, who adored the very ground that Laura walked on, and who had always deferred to her, even to marrying the man whom Miss Allington had picked out.

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She knew that Leila would be made comfortable, that she would be left undisturbed if she wished to be quiet; and if, on the other hand, she wished to be amused, Gladys Vereker would be only too glad to fall in with any plans that were proposed, though she would never take the initiative; and this was just what Leila Van Cuyp needed and longed for.

Laura Allington, her sister, or their affairs, however, meant nothing to Mrs. Osborn Wright at this moment, as she was fully occupied in studying each detail of the tea-service. At last after minute scrutiny, she was satisfied that all her orders had been carried out according to her ideas.

If she could have asked Leila alone, it would have pleased her better, but this, of course, she could not do. If Mrs. Vereker became unbearable, she could call in someone who was expected to come to tea shortly, someone who could possibly be invented by Carla, if she ever returned from her luncheon; if she did not come soon, she would not be in time to save the possible situation.

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Carla did come at this moment, looking particularly prosperous, though somewhat dishevelled, as the wind had risen, and she had been blown about, on her walk back from Bruton Street.

"This really looks—splendid!" she observed, nodding approvingly at the tea-table; "really, Hermy, you are wonderful—I can almost imagine Simmons and your own house before me! But who's coming?—the Queen? It's quite regal!"

"Only Leila and the Vereker," answered Hermy; "but don't you really like the way everything is done? I think it's quite—nice!"

"Of course I do—Oh! by the way, Stephen Marlowe is coming to tea at five; he's apt to be punctual, so I hope——"

"Don't worry, dear," said Hermy sweetly; "Leila will fly if anyone else comes—she was most particular about not having anybody else."

"You expect me, then?" asked Carla: "but, of course, I'll come and entertain the

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Honourable for you, so that you may have Leila all to yourself."

"Thank you." And then Mrs. Wright suddenly recollected a piece of news she wished to tell Carla: "By the way, I'm sure I saw Marjorie Camp to-day—at least, almost."

"When?—where?" asked Mrs. James excitedly.

"It was this way. I was on my way to Cavendish Square to see Leila, but there was such a crowd in Bond Street, I told the chauffeur to go round some other way, for I was late as it was, and Leila said she was going out punctually at eleven; so he went by Hanover Square and Holles Street. There, of course, as luck would have it, there was a block, just by the house that Lord Byron was born in—oh! you know the one with his bust on it—well, it's 24 or 42, I don't remember which—it doesn't make the slightest difference, though—only it was opposite to that we stuck, and at the house just above that a hansom drew up at the curb, and a young girl with a chiffon veil

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over her face alighted—yes, she was dressed in black, and with a black veil.

The motor started up suddenly, and I looked away for a moment; when I peered back she had disappeared. I only saw her for the fraction of a second, but I am almost certain it was Marjorie—her walk, the way she held up her dress—oh! it was unmistakable! What can it mean, I wonder? I thought they were in Paris.”

“So did I,” answered Carla, “and I must not forget to question Stephen about the Camps’ whereabouts, when he comes to tea.” He would be sure to know, as he was in frequent communication with Chubb, who was their mutual adviser. “But I must fly and change my dress.”

“Do,” agreed Hermy, lighting the wick of the kettle, for it was just striking the hour, “and come in to support me when you are ready.”

Half an hour later, Carla entered the room, kissed Leila warmly, shook hands with Mrs. Vereker, and talked with her for

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some time, as she had promised Hermy she would.

Mrs. Wright, taking advantage of this move, entered into earnest conversation with Leila, with an eye in reserve for Mrs. Vereker, whom she quietly observed from time to time.

"I'm glad it was all managed so quickly and easily," she said, referring to the divorce, "but it must have been a dreadful strain, my poor darling! You must try and live it down, those frightful days!"

"I am trying to," said Leila, "but it was too horrible for me to be able to forget so soon. That Stanley—but no, I will not speak of him—that is all over and done with."

"It must be very interesting," remarked Carla, as Mrs. Vereker finished an account of a recent visit to Parliament; "but the suffragettes——"

"Oh, don't speak of them, they are too frightful even to think of——"

"Hermy!" asked Carla casually, "what time did you say Mr. Marlowe was com-

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ing?" She had got to the point where the Honourable Mrs. Vereker was beginning to get on her nerves, and seized on Stephen's arrival in desperation, just as a drowning man catches at a straw. Mrs. Wright, after a curious look at her, played up well, as she always did.

"Mr Marlowe!" she said interrogatively; "it was five I think he said, wasn't it?"

"Oh! I must go if anyone else is expected," cried Leila Van Cuyp, rising like a frightened dove; "and you promised—"

"He is more of a friend of Carla's than mine," answered Hermy, unblushingly. "I'm sorry you won't wait, though; I have hardly seen anything of you. I'm sure he won't bite you—he's really tame!"

"I couldn't think of it; come, we must be off. I couldn't bear to be caught. It's almost five now; oh! Gladys, do—do hurry! I can't endure seeing anyone I don't know well; it makes me so frightfully nervous!"

After the two ladies had gone, Mrs. Wright turned upon Carla.

"You wretched woman!" she cried an-

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grily, "how could you do it? You have no patience, no self-control. That's the great fault with the Americans of to-day; they should copy the manners of the Old World and imitate its poise—its—"

"Frankly," said Carla, laughing, "I couldn't stand that Vereker woman any longer! She is estimable and worthy, I grant you, but—oh, Lord! Nor could I stand hearing you dissect the tenderest and most sacred feelings of my poor Leila——"

"My dear Carla, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" exclaimed Mrs. Wright severely; "it was a great relief to the poor thing to speak out to me. It is much better than continuing to repress herself. Besides, it really was pathetically beautiful——"

"That's what the surgeons always say——" sneered Carla scornfully; but Hermy, really annoyed, flounced out of the room, as she feared to hear more, for Carla might go on to suggest that she had tried to impress the Vereker woman—that that was the real object of the tea-party, so that was why she fled, feeling that discretion was the better

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part of valour, for no woman can patiently stand by and hear the truth, and Carla always told the truth when roused.

After Mrs. Wright had left the room, leaving her friend in possession of the field, Carla stood by the fire in deep thought. Finally she looked up and laughed softly.

“What a delightful fraud Hermy is!” she said, sighing regretfully; “but I do admire her more than anyone I know. I never saw another woman who could be so consistent in making believe, and I often wonder how much she believes herself when she must know the case is simply—unbelievable.”

Carla laughed at her Irish bull, and rang for fresh tea. A few minutes later Stephen was announced.

They discussed the weather with exemplary persistency until the waiter returned with the tea, and then the polite restraint between them gave way to their usual spirit of goodfellowship, as the servant went out and left them alone.

“Any news?” she asked as he poured out

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his tea, and held out a lump of sugar in the tongs toward him interrogatively.

"None at all," nodding his head in the affirmative; "what is there to do, except wait patiently? If there was only something tangible! But there isn't, and I hate to feel that I am powerless—that I can't do anything to hurry matters up. Don't you understand? I've always been a man of action and I've been unusually successful ever since I was a young man. It's hard—what can I do?"

"There are three things you might try," suggested Mrs. James after a pause, during which she sipped her tea reflectively. "In the first place, you might go into the world—that wouldn't be difficult—a few good letters are easily obtained, and—think what your money could do for you! You would have to keep your eyes and ears wide open, and you might see or hear something. It's all horribly indefinite, though. Again, you might familiarize yourself with the London theatrical world, or, lastly, you might try the slums——"

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"You are suggesting detective work in high and low places," he said, smiling bitterly: "but you are right, I don't think it would have any surprising results—it isn't practical. I have a very strong feeling that pure chance must bring us together."

"And I assert again, dear friend," she replied firmly, "that that possibility is not by any means so remote as you think—"

"But what will reveal her to me?"

Stephen put down his cup and was silent. He fell into a reverie, gazing with rapt attention into the fire.

Then he looked up and shivered.

"Do give me another cup of tea," he said, and his voice sounded strained and harsh. "I'm cold."

"You were so absorbed," remarked Carla, as she poured out a fresh cup of tea, "that I could not bear to interrupt. 'I hope you have arrived at some conclusion.'"

"No," answered Marlowe, more brusquely than he intended, "you know I have not—"

"But do not despair, dear Mr. Marlowe,

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you will meet your daughter—I know it—oh, yes, I know it.”

“I wish I could believe that, for I’m losing faith in myself,” said Stephen sadly, “and that’s a bad sign; it’s the beginning of the end.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Mrs. James brightly, for she saw the necessity of changing the subject; “do you know that Hermy is almost certain that she saw Marjorie Camp in town to-day?”

“Oh! that’s impossible!” laughed Stephen, as about this he could be positive, “for I heard from Chubb to-day, and he writes that they are in Paris. Whereabouts did you say she saw her?”

“In front of a house in Holles Street, near Cavendish Square,” replied she, “next to that one with the bust of Byron on it—”

“That’s really very odd!” mused Stephen, “looks like a case of double personality, for here is Chubb’s letter, written just nine days ago, and you can see that his information is exceedingly concise; besides, we both know he is absolutely reliable.”

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"Hermy spoke of the girl as if she were a creature of flesh and blood," insisted Mrs. James, as he glanced over the kettle.

"I can't bear to talk of this any more," he said with a sigh, "and any way I must be going. So I'll say *au revoir*—but not good-bye," he added jocosely. "I'm sorry to have made such an ass of myself."

"I'm sorry to say it *is* good-bye," corrected Mrs James regretfully, "for we're off to-morrow."

"You are going away? I'm sorry," he murmured as he held out his hand; "I'm sorry," he repeated earnestly. "But good-luck to you, and—good-bye!"

Stephen left the room rather abruptly. He hated partings. And this one from Mrs. James made him particularly sad. He had learned to love this splendid woman, for he knew that she was indeed a true friend. He decided to go out and take a short drive. He continued his way down town, and when he reached the street he directed the commissionaire to call him a hansom. When one had swung round with a flourish and drew

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up before the door, he stepped in and said that he would take it by the hour.

"Where to, sir?" inquired the driver, after he had started, speaking down through the trap.

"Anywhere, except the park."

"Some of the Squares looks fine in the hevenin' light, sir—"

"Anywhere," growled Marlowe; "only go on, will you?" The man closed the trap, with a vindictive snap, and whipped up the horse.

The cab continued its course, through Berkeley Square, turned into Davies Street, and came to Oxord Street; there it swung to the left.

With a sharper turn, almost a lurch, the cab entered Holles Street. Stephen awoke from his reverie. He looked out. A house with a bust of Byron on its front arrested his attention.

"That house on the right, the one with the bust on it!" he called out, raising the trap to give the order. I wish to stop there!"

The cab came to a halt, and Marlowe

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jumped out. In front of him was another hansom. Beside it, a woman in a dark dress and holding a purse open in her hand, was expostulating with the driver. Stephen heard the lady admit that she never knew what to pay. But she paid him the price he demanded, and as she turned away, saw Marlowe.

"I beg your pardon—can I be of any assistance?"

"Mr. Marlowe!" she said, and suddenly paused as if in a quandary.

"You!" he exclaimed, for he had recognized her; but Marjorie stopped him with an appealing gesture.

"Please come in; my—mother will be—glad to see—you."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RESULT OF A MEETING

MARJORIE, after a backward glance at Stephen, unlocked the door, and he followed her in, though he was still excited and a good deal bewildered.

He could not help but feel that there was a mystery, for it was in the very air.

The very silence between them, as they entered the dimly-lit hall, only intensified his desire for enlightenment.

She went directly into the library, and, after drawing the portieres, turned and for the first time faced him.

"Will you wait here for a few minutes," she asked, evidently not completely at her ease, at which he wondered, "while I prepare my mother for your visit? She has been a good deal broken of late, and I try to spare her all the anxiety I can."

"But won't you explain?" begged Stephen, as he advanced toward her.

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"No," she answered in a tone that was intended to be curt, in order possibly to cover some deeper emotion. "I—my mother will tell you—all. Wait here and she will come to you shortly."

She turned and left the room. A certain repression in her manner had silenced and abashed him. What could it mean? It was certainly very strange!

She had spoken to him in the impersonal tone which one reserves for strangers. There was none of the old-time freedom, and somehow he felt afraid of her. Why should he wait here? These people evidently did not wish to see him. Perhaps he had better go—or should he wait? He could hardly retreat now that he was actually here and waiting for the mistress of the house to appear.

Yes, that would be best. Of course they had some good reason for concealing themselves—it was their business, and not his. It had been they he had seen in the restaurant that day! Had they seen him too? and had they purposely avoided him? If so, his

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entrance into their house was all the more unpardonable. But what reason could they have had for avoiding him? Had he offended them? and, if so, in what way? He had no recollection of having done so.

A servant came in, lighted the lamps, drew the blinds, and, as he turned to go, said that Mrs. Worthington would be down directly.

Stephen stared at the man's retreating figure in consternation. Had he heard aright? Worthington!—the name was totally strange to him. What could it all mean? She must be a sister of Mrs. Camp: that was it. Mrs Camp was not well enough to see him, so she had sent her representative to dismiss him—politely, of course, but to get rid of him with all possible despatch.

Perhaps this Mrs. Worthington was a superior housekeeper to whom was delegated the disagreeable task of turning him out. Why, if this were so, should he wait to be dismissed? He moved quickly to the door and listened intently. Not a sound, except

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the faint noise of the traffic without. Could he get out unseen?

Suppose he were observed by a servant, who happened to be the one who had given the message, what explanation could he offer for his sudden departure? The man might want to detain him, knowing nothing of his presence in the house.

He thought it best to remain. After all, he had wished to go into this house—it had been done naturally; so why worry? He hoped to discover the reason of this extraordinary state of affairs soon.

Mrs. Worthington was taking her own time. Why did she not come?

What could it mean?

He walked over to the door leading to the hall and listened. The soft closing of a distant door was all he heard. He opened his watch, and saw that barely three minutes had passed. It seemed an age. Was no one coming? The servant had said Mrs. Worthington would be down directly. Who was Mrs. Worthington? What was she doing in this house?

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All at once a sense of unreality enveloped him, and he wondered what he was doing here and why he had come!

Five minutes passed. He was beginning to grow more impatient. He walked up and down the room. Again he listened, straining every nerve to catch any possible sound. Yes, a door had closed softly somewhere upstairs. He made out whispered words. Someone was coming down the staircase.

He walked over to a table and caught up a book, pretending to be absorbed in its contents.

The door opened, and a lady entered. He saw that she was feeble and walked with a stick, and that her hair was snow-white under the widow's cap she was wearing, and that her face was sad and lined with suffering; but as he put down the book and came forward, she spoke a few words in greeting. Then he recognized her as Mrs. Camp.

"It is pleasant to see you again, Mr. Marlowe," she said, giving him her hand for a moment; "won't you sit down?"

He wondered what she had to say to him.

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He saw that she was very much changed. She had suddenly grown into an old woman.

"Yes," she replied, as she read what was in his mind, "I am an old, a very old woman. Please don't think it necessary to apologize, as I am only too conscious of my infirmities. Age had to come, but it came rather suddenly to me."

"I am sorry," murmured Stephen in some confusion; I am afraid—I—"

"No, believe me, I am glad you have found us, for I feel that I have no right to shut—Theo out from every pleasure."

"Theo!—" cried Stephen involuntarily, "who is Theo?"

"She is my daughter," she faltered. And then with a touch of her old impulse she continued earnestly: "Mr. Marlowe, I may speak—frankly and—openly to you? Mr. Chubb told me if I ran across you, I could—trust you. My only—excuse is that I am very much—alone, and it would be a service to me if you would—prove yourself a friend and listen for a little while, only a little while. Mr. Chubb has been so kind

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and thoughtful, but he—is not here and I have only told my daughter what I thought—necessary. She is young, standing on the threshold of life—”

“I understand,” broke in Stephen sympathetically. “Believe me, I appreciate your confidence and trust. I am flattered—I—but these are empty words, for I consider it an honour and a privilege to be allowed to serve you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Marlowe. I believe your words come from your heart. Poor Theo was afraid she had made a mistake in bringing you in. I confess it was a shock to find myself once more in touch with the world I have tried to forget, but now I am glad—I am glad. If you only knew what a comfort it is to have the prospect of a friend to cling to whom I can speak as if to myself—”

“If you really care to speak freely to me—why say what your heart dictates, frankly and unreservedly.”

“How good you are,” she exclaimed warmly.

Stephen, obeying an irresistible impulse,

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looked up to meet the eyes of the old lady fastened upon him. In her glance he read hesitation, uncertainty, and, he fancied, doubt.

“Mr. Marlowe,” she said slowly, regarding him gravely, though he saw that her former emotion had given place to a firmer and most pronounced resolution, “I might as well confess to you that I—that is we—my daughter and I—both saw and recognized you that day at the Princess’ Restaurant, but I purposely—avoided you. I could not bear just then to see anyone who reminded me of what I called my dead life, and—I had a most disagreeable experience in Paris, which was the reason we decided to leave there.”

“I did not tell all to you, just enough to make my explanation sound probable; and she has been a great comfort—she has asked no questions, and has been most tactful in sparing me. It was because of what happened in Paris that we, or rather I, made up my mind to come here and settle for the time being. When you saw us we were

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house-hunting, and the reason we went to such a public place for lunch was because my daughter wished it so much, and I—could not refuse her.”

When I left home, I did not see the necessity for concealing our plans, and I did not even think of doing so. It was a reporter who came one day—he was admitted by mistake—and his impertinence, besides the annoyance he caused me, made me decide to buy his silence. Yes, I knew it was foolish, but I lost my head. It was after that we came to London secretly, and for that reason we moved here, also in secret. To make our presence here secure, I engaged this house under an assumed name—”

“Then you are—”

“Mrs. Worthington,” she answered with quiet dignity. “My daughter’s real name being Theodora, I just began calling her Theo, so you see—how it—is?”

“Yes, but you must have had some—reason for concealment. I am afraid I don’t—but I have no right to inquire. Forgive me.”

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"Please, Mr. Marlowe, do not speak of forgiveness in this connection," begged Mrs. Worthington earnestly, "or you will make what I have decided to do more—difficult."

"Why, of course," agreed Stephen, somewhat taken aback, "but I think I'd really better go—"

"And that is what I don't want you to do," objected Mrs. Worthington, with a touch of genuine spirit. "I have no reason for telling you what I would not care to have anyone else know, except that—oh! Mr. Marlowe, women are incomprehensible—they hardly know how they reach certain conclusions; but please be patient, and listen to me."

"Anything I can do"—began Marlowe.

"All, Mr. Marlowe, all or nothing."

He was about to speak when, perceiving his purpose, she forestalled him.

"No," she said with a sigh, "do not say anything yet, for I intend to tell you the truth about what happened when my husband—died."

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“In the first place, Mr. Marlowe, you must know that my husband’s death was not a natural one. He—took his own life. It is a terrible thing to do, but that is what he did. After he dropped—dead on the floor of the Stock Exchange, he was removed to Mr. Chubb’s office, where I and his doctor were summoned. I was present at his examination, which was thorough—the coroner being present,—and, to make a long story short, it was certified correctly, as far as the official tests went, that his death was due to apoplexy.

“Later, when Mr. Chubb and I were alone, he gave me a note to read. It was addressed to me by my late husband. In it he stated he had used a drug, an Indian one, and—so he died. I found out that he had stopped just short of disgrace, and it was I, whom he never trusted with his confidence in matters of business, who paid off his debts, bought the influence which saved his name—yes, Mr. Marlowe, it was I who did this. You may ask me why I did it. Because, my friend, if I may call you so,

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though I meant very little to him, I loved him. God forgive me!—I loved him.”

“If he had taken my advice, which he had often scorned—I could have kept him safe. But the gold mania had him in its deadly grip, and he could not stop. He went on, stopping at nothing, until he controlled almost all. If his last scheme had gone through—but there was a tiny flaw, which he luckily saw in time—he would, indeed have had all in his power. And he would have loved me as I loved him until the end!” she concluded with infinite sadness.

During this conversation, Marlowe learned that love could be both majestic and unselfish; that it must have complete trust; also, and this was the beginning of his knowledge, that it enveloped and pervaded a woman's nature—that it was her all—her life. Man could look upon love as a pastime, or a thing apart, being at the same time both sincere and earnest, but his love was not the same as a woman's. Man is as a knight, who enters the list, fully equipped;

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but it is of his charger and trappings, his armour and his appearance, that he is thinking, not of the prize of pure womanhood who waits to crown him as the victor; for her it is the man, the hero alone; with her nothing else counts. Stephen was deeply affected by her words.

“Dear Mrs. Worthington,” he said finally, and there was a new tone in his voice, “I wish to thank you for telling me all this; believe me, you will never have cause to regret it.”

“Thank you! she answered simply; “you are so good—so good!”

Later on, when Marlowe reached his hotel his mind was full of many thoughts. He tossed his hat and stick aside, and sank into a chair. The face of the old lady, which had been full of trouble when he first saw it, rose in fancy and smiled gratefully at him. But the picture which remained longest was one of a young girl, also in black, who smiled at him too.

CHAPTER XIX

AN ADVERTISEMENT ANSWERED

LETTERS and bills! Stephen opened one after the other, and still the number did not seem appreciably to diminish. The letters were from Mrs. Wright, Mrs. James, and the last was from Mr. Wright. What could he have to say?

James wrote at his wife's request to say he hoped Marlowe could join them in Rome, where they expected to arrive in a few days. A letter, care of their bankers there, would always reach him. He had heard Marlowe's praises so often sung by his wife, that he was really anxious to meet him.

All three letters were written from some small town in Italy, and those of both ladies were full of amusing details of their trip and its mishaps; especially that of Mrs. James, in whose letter he recognized a new note of happiness; and he was undeniably glad, for she had hinted it would be due to

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his efforts if a reconciliation took place between her husband and herself.

But that was nonsense, so he laughed as he tossed the letter aside, to take up the next one, which was a bill from his tailor in Clifford Street. Other bills were opened, mostly from Bond Street purveyors, and these glanced over, he took up the last one.

“I have reason to believe,” said the writer, “that I can give you some information about the girl you are looking for. Shall call at a quarter to five this afternoon.

(Signed) “D.”

What could it mean? The letter was written in a refined hand.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. A young woman came in. She advanced to the centre of the room. Marlowe looked at her questioningly for a moment.

“Did you wish to see me?” inquired he at last, motioning the girl to a chair by his desk. “I am Stephen Marlowe.”

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"Then there is no mistake," she answered promptly, seating herself and leisurely drawing off her gloves, "for I am—the daughter of—Linda Leigh——"

"You are—what?" cried Stephen, jumping quickly to his feet.

"I am the daughter of Linda Leigh," she repeated; "does that surprise you? Ah! let me tell you how I found it out."

He was overcome. He waited for a few minutes with closed eyes until he recovered.

"Go on!" he muttered hoarsely.

"After my mother died," she began obediently, "I was taken care of by an old woman, who I always believed was my mother's sister—her name was Jameson; but I never could see why I was called Dora Jameson, because my mother's name was, I believe, Manson—though I never knew what her maiden name was. I had a feeling, naturally, that this was curious, but I never could get any information on the subject from Aunt Annie, as she taught me to call her. Sometimes I thought she had some reason for concealing her own

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name, and that Jameson was an alias. I wondered, too, if she had interchanged the two names, either for the purpose of concealing her own identity, or for some unexplained reason, and then again I thought there might possibly be some mystery about my—mother."

"What made you think that?" asked Stephen quickly.

"I don't know," she answered, "except that my—aunt always put me off if I spoke or asked questions about her. This, of course, made me all the more curious, and I began to wonder what had been the mystery about her, for mystery, I was convinced, there had been.

"Ah!—when did your mother die?" he asked suddenly.

"When I was born," she answered without hesitation. "Aunt Annie admitted that much herself, and I was brought at once to the house in B— where Mrs. Jameson was then living."

"How long did you remain with her?"

"Until last year."

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“Why did you leave her?”

“We had a misunderstanding. She accused me of thieving, and, when it was too late, admitted that she had been mistaken. She begged me to stay, that she was ill and needed care, but the story had spread, so I left. I could not stay.”

“You said that you were Linda Leigh’s daughter, and that if I were Stephen Marlowe there was no mistake,” he said after a pause. “How do you explain those statements?”

“I’ll tell you; but first you’d better hear about the supposed theft, for it all fits together like parts of a puzzle. She thought I’d stolen a paper, and I denied it. She called me a thief, and the story, as I said, got round. Before I left I found a charred piece of paper, like a bit of an old letter, quite by chance in an old stove that stood in an outhouse. I tried to put it together, and I made out parts that made almost—a sentence.”

“Your name was written there, for one thing, and that was why I said what I did

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about there being no mistake if you were really Stephen Marlowe. I'll draw a facsimile of the paper, and put a line where words are left out. It will look more natural, and you can see it as I saw it. Here it is!" she exclaimed, after she had worked diligently to reproduce on a sheet of paper, the original she had in mind.

"—Stephen Marlowe—never forgive—died—her child—and promise—to keep—secret Dor—was Linda Leigh's child—"

"This I enclosed in an envelope, with a line to her telling her where I had found it."

"It is very curious," said Stephen, as if to himself; "but haven't you any other—any written proof?"

"No," and she shook her head; "but you might write to Mrs. Jameson for it. She lives in the town of Waterville, Connecticut, at 16 Church Street. She moved from B—last year. You see, I'd be glad to do what I could to help you out, but I couldn't bring myself to write to her after what happened."

"No, I suppose not," said Stephen, determining to follow up this clue by writing

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himself; "but what are you doing here? You're very young to be traveling alone."

"Yes, I am," she admitted, smiling; "but I had to live somehow, so I went on the stage. I was over here with the *Dream of Love* company, and I stayed over a steamer with another girl to keep me from getting lonely, because I wanted to see you. Do you think I am really your daughter?"

"I can't be certain until I hear from Mrs. Jameson," he answered slowly; "but where can I find you if it should be necessary?"

"We leave on the *San Francisco* next week. I'm down as Dora Manson—that's my stage name; and letters in New York, care of the K— Theatre, will always reach me. I want to tell you one thing before I go: I believe you *are* my father, and——"

"I—I don't know what to think," was the bewildered reply. "I'll let you know. I hope it may be so. It's too vague yet to speak with certainty. How old did you say you were?"

"Almost—twenty-two. I was born in—1886."

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He was inclined to accept her for what she posed as being—his daughter. His daughter!—and yet the evidence of a few detached words on a half-burnt sheet that Dora was the child of Linda Leigh was not, could not, be conclusive, unsupported by further corroborative testimony. And Mrs. Jameson should contribute that, if she would. There could be no valid reason why she should refuse. Who was Mrs. Annie Jameson? Had he ever heard the name before? He had a faint remembrance. Why yes, Marjorie — Theo — had mentioned a woman by the name of Jameson! That was it. She had been her nurse. What an odd coincidence of names! The names were, however, the only point of resemblance, for Theo's mother had been Alida Mason; she had been adopted at the age of five years by Mrs. Camp, now Mrs. Worthington; her birthplace was unknown to him, and even the town where she lived. Whereas in Dora's case it was different; she had been born near B— and lived near B—and she stated, on

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somewhat flimsy evidence, that her mother had been Linda Leigh.

After mature deliberation this evidence did not appear to him as improbable as at first, and he was more and more convinced that Mrs. Jameson could make it certain. Of course, he could not force her to give him an answer; but so much depended on it—the work of the last twenty years, in fact—that he would use every argument to induce her to do so before he could acknowledge himself beaten.

Who was the Jameson woman that she should be a potential obstacle to the working out of his cherished plans? Who was she? Whoever she was, he would not remain passive while there was a chance that Linda's child—his child—ah! fool that he was!—why, of course, Jameson and Manson were one and the same person! Why had he not already guessed what was perfectly obvious?

The reason for the change of name in Eliza's case was clear to Stephen. She wished to keep Linda's secret, besides keeping her child and its father more surely

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apart. What possible reason was there why she should have hit upon it? Was it a family name? Yes, for Eliza's mother, he remembered, had been a Jameson. What more natural than that she should add it to her own name, first as a surname, and then drop her family name, leaving the Jameson in its place?

Miss Manson had been born in S—, fifty miles away. What more natural than that she should appear as a perfectly respectable member of society in the town of B— under the name of Jameson?

A woman of her age and quiet habits only needed a wedding ring, which was not difficult to obtain—the one she was wearing was her mother's—to become what she appeared to be, without danger of awkward questioning, or the awkward possibility of doubt being cast upon her right to do so.

He wrote his letter to Eliza, but addressed it to Mrs. Annie Jameson in Waterville, as Dora had suggested.

While waiting developments Marlowe cultivated more closely the acquaintance of

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the ladies in Holles Street, until he formed the habit of often dropping in about tea-time, and this naturally brought him much into the society of Theo.

He was conscious both of the growing strength of the attraction for Theo and the weakening character of the sense of duty toward Dora.

The fact that Eliza had posed as the girl's aunt, not only to the girl herself, but to the world, and moreover had cleverly introduced an element of mystery into Dora's mind concerning her mother, only made the link between them stronger in his mind. But, meanwhile, Theo's lovely eyes were upon him, and he sighed as the time passed so slowly.

At the end of ten days the S. S. *San Francisco* steamed westward from Southampton on her way to New York. Stephen read the announcement calmly, but with a feeling of sadness tugging at his heart-strings.

The next day the papers were full of an account of the terrible disaster. The *San*

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Francisco had foundered during a dense fog, and later it was discovered that a German steamer of lesser tonnage had rammed the larger boat amidships. In an incredibly short time the vessel had sunk, with one boatful of survivors adrift on a raging sea; but these last, a mere handful of miserable wretches, were never seen or heard of again.

Marlowe's first emotion was one of anger that fate had snatched his child from him. He only hoped she had not suffered, and that death had come suddenly.

A note came from Theo, saying that her mother hoped Mr. Marlowe was free for the following evening, and would give them the pleasure of his company at dinner at eight o'clock. No one else was coming.

CHAPTER XX

A STRUGGLE BETWEEN LOVE AND DUTY

WHAT a gamut of emotions Stephen passed through in the following twenty-four hours only those who have truly loved can even imagine.

Love's pain was his, also the fear of love, but—would love's joy, too, ever be vouchsafed him? Did she already love him? Would she ever love him?

He could not help contrasting this love with that which he had felt for poor Linda.

And yet he felt as if he must always have loved Theo. There was something sacred, he thought, about his love for Theo, something he could not bear any one to know except Theo herself, and he feared to put the question which sooner or later he must ask, and whose answer would mean so much to him.

He was going to see her to-night! Should

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he speak then? Would an occasion offer? Could she by any possibility love him as he loved her? And again he feared in the very midst of his gladness.

Theo! He loved her. It was wonderful. But what of her? Was she thinking of him at this moment—could she be?

What a fool he was! An addle-pated fool! Nothing more or less. And yet—he knew that he loved this woman, loved her beyond reason, beyond everything.

He had tried hard to make a gentleman of himself; more than that, in his inmost heart he had tried to make a *man* of himself, and he felt in some measure he had succeeded. Ah! if she would only think so, too.

He rang for Jenkins and completed his toilet. This done, he decided not to go out, as it was late, so he ordered his luncheon to be served in his sitting-room. In the meantime he read the newspaper, finished a letter to Chubb saying he had met the ladies of the Worthington family, that he was dining with them that night, and that he and they were already very good friends.

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Two hours later he was admitted to the house in Holles Street. He was shown at once into the library. Mrs. Worthington's voice greeted him.

"Theo will be down soon; but sit down and talk to me for a few minutes. Tell me what you have been doing."

"I am afraid I am here rather early," returned Stephen, shaking hands with his hostess. "Doing—I? Nothing more serious than taking a solitary walk along the Embankment. It was beautiful, though, and I enjoyed it."

"I envy a man his independence. A woman could never do that sort of thing, because in the midst of her reverie she would be brought rudely down to earth by a gruff voice commanding her to 'move on.'"

"The majesty of the law!" laughed Stephen. "Oh! it has no sense of the beautiful, and, besides, it is no respecter of persons—"

"Unless it happens to be a man," suggested she with a faint smile.

"My dear Mrs. Worthington," exclaimed Marlowe, in meek protest, "that is distinctly

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unfair to men as a class. Do you make no allowance for the individual?"

"Oh, yes, I do," she said, regarding him more gravely; "but let us be serious for a moment—"

Miss Worthington—"?" suggested Stephen, looking toward the door.

"Was late in coming in," replied her mother. "She went to the city for me, but arrived too late to find the man I wished to see; so she had to take a long drive to his residence, which is on the other side of the town, as it was necessary for me to see him on business to-night. He is Mr. Lumley Soames—"

"I know him," said Stephen; "he is my solicitor. But I am sorry you have any worry that needs legal advice. You speak as if it were urgent. Is it?"

"Yes—and no," she said evasively. "I am a very ill woman, and I have sent for Mr. Soames to-night because I was told that my health made it imperative for me to make my will—which I have never done yet—without delay. Besides, there is Theo—in

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case I die suddenly I would like to feel that she is not only provided for, but that there is some one to look after her. Of course, Mr. Chubb—”

“Yes, of course. You are ill? In what way? Who told you?”

“Chance-Melville. He it was who told me, after I had begged him to tell me the truth, that my heart was very seriously affected.”

“I am very sorry; but as I am your confidential adviser, would you care to tell me—more in detail, you know—about what he said?”

“I did not feel well,” she began, “after my husband’s death, and all the worry I had at that time. I thought nothing of it, putting it down to the strain I had been under. Rest and quiet, I thought, would be all that was necessary. But I did not improve; in fact, I knew I was slowly growing worse. I was not alarmed until I began to suffer from shortness of breath after exertion, and sometimes pain, which I attributed to indigestion. One day I was attacked by faintness. I was alone at the time. When I recovered slight-

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ly I became really frightened, and I drank a small glass of brandy, which revived me so quickly that I was encouraged to believe I had foolishly made a mountain out of a mole hill. I did see a doctor in Paris, who treated me for indigestion, but the relief I obtained was only temporary, so I made up my mind when I came here to see a specialist. Chance-Melville's name was the only one familiar to me, so I decided to consult him, never imagining for a moment that it was my heart that—but I am boring you, dear Mr. Marlowe—”

“On the contrary, my dear madam, I have been most interested.”

Mrs. Worthington began to speak again, and Stephen listened to her with an effort, which he tried hard to conceal.

“You must say nothing of this to Theo,” she said, “for she knows nothing—absolutely nothing. Hush! Here she comes.”

Stephen looked toward the girl with frank admiration as she paused for an instant in the doorway before entering the room.

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“Mother—I’m so sorry. Mr. Marlowe, can you ever forgive me?”

“You are not late, dear; but please ring the bell,” her mother said with a smile. Stephen laughed. When dinner was announced he offered his arm to Mrs. Worthington.

The next hour passed gaily. The dinner was excellent, and the absence of formality, the stimulus of Theo’s wit, made the time fly only too quickly. Soon he knew they would return to the library, where coffee would be served, and then—but he could get no further, for he longed to know when he could be alone with Theo. When would Soames come? How long would Mrs. Worthington remain?

Coffee was brought in, and the empty cups had been replaced on the tray.

When he felt that he could endure it no longer Mrs. Worthington arose.

“I heard my maid come downstairs,” she said; “I told her to come shortly after nine. You will excuse me, Mr. Marlowe, if I say good-night. I shall not come down again

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to-night, for I must still be careful of myself."

Stephen bent over her hand and thanked her for a very pleasant evening.

"You will stay and entertain Theo, as I shall be engaged," added Mrs. Worthington. "She will be alone. So stay and have mercy on her, won't you?"

Stephen said he would be delighted to do so, but to his surprise and discomfiture Theo stepped to her mother's side.

"I shall go with you, dear," she said; "and then return to Mr. Marlowe. Will you excuse me for a minute?"

His mind was in a whirl. The respite would enable him to find himself. He was so agitated he was glad to be alone. The supreme moment of his happiness was soon to come, and yet he knew he would be glad when he had made his declaration.

All at once he felt he had regained his balance, his courage. He smiled with assurance. He was in a state of exaltation. The hour had come. It was now or never! He waited for her to return with eagerness. Just

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then the curtains parted and Theo came in.

"I'll ring and have the coffee taken away," she said; "for I hate to see empty cups."

There was an awkward silence for a moment. Then Theo, unable to stand the tension any longer, was the first to speak.

"My dear Mr. Marlowe, why are you so silent?"

"I have a great deal to say to you," he said, his voice trembling slightly, "but I don't know where to begin."

"What is it about?"

"Is it not curious," pursued Stephen, as if awakening from a dream and scarcely conscious that she had spoken, "that last week I imagined for one minute that I might never see you again?"

"Yes," replied Theo, breathing rather than speaking the word.

"And now I ask you," he inquired softly, "why to-day should end?"

Theo gazed straight in front of her.

"And why must it?" he persisted gently;

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“why will you not have it go on like this—always we two together?”

Theo did not move. Stephen pursued the advantage he felt he had gained.

“You must,” he insisted, taking one of her hands timidly in his; “you will—ah, I know you will.”

She did not draw away. Her mind wavered as if in soft reluctance. Stephen drew nearer. She did not resist. With the utmost gentleness he urged her to him.

“My love—you do love me? Ah,” he cried passionately, as her head rested at last on his shoulder, “will you be my wife?”

“I love you,” she murmured, her passion overcoming her; “you cannot guess how much.”

Turning away suddenly she buried her face in the soft, cool cushion of the sofa near which she had been standing. He tenderly lifted her head, bent down as he turned more toward her, and kissed her. Then he drew her to him and kissed her cheek, her neck, and the white arm that hung loosely at her side.

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“I love you,” she said softly, and threw both arms around his neck.

Stephen closed his eyes for a moment in rapture. His cup of happiness was full to overflowing. After all, she was to be his.

When he rose to go, for it was late, she clung to him, and would not have it. But he, gently resisting, drew away. Then, taking her again in his arms, murmured, “Good-night, beloved,” and she, with eager gaze, echoed, “Good-night;” then, “To-morrow you will come again—to-morrow.”

Again he kissed her, softly releasing her arms, which were clasped about his neck; and so he left her, treading on air, as it seemed to him, for he was happy—happier than he had ever even dreamed he could be.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DAWN OF TO-MORROW

IT was not often that Stephen lunched in the hotel, but as he was going in a motor with Theo into the country to try and find a house where they should live after they were married he wished to finish and leave early. It was not the first expedition they had made, but he had heard of a house at Swindon he wanted Theo to see, one which he thought would suit.

An hour later they were in the motor bound for the country. He breathed the freer air like a man who had been starved, and he turned a laughing face to the girl by his side.

“What is it, Stephen?” she asked. “Won’t you tell me about it, too? You have no right to leave me out. We are one now, or soon shall be. It’s all the same thing, isn’t it?”

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And we should be one in heart, mind and soul, you know."

"It's only that I'm happy, dear," he said, holding her hand in his and looking out of the window with a rapt expression on his face; "but I wish we could go on like this forever, and never reach the sea."

"The sea!" she exclaimed wonderingly; "what do you mean by the—sea?"

"The place where we would have to stop—" he smiled back at her; "you see," he continued happily, "love has made a poet of me."

Theo looked softly at him, but was silent. The moment was too full of many things for speech. It would seem like a profanation to break such an exquisite silence; besides, she could not utter a sound; her heart was too full of happiness. She felt as if it must stifle her. She looked tenderly at him. It was all that she could do.

They reached Slough and passed through it on their way to Reading; then skirting the Illsley Downs arrived at Swinden.

The house stood at some distance from the

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highroad in its own grounds. They stopped at the lodge for a moment to speak to the keeper, and then, after passing along a magnificent avenue of tall shade trees, drew up at last before the house.

“It is too lovely!” cried Theo, as she stepped out of the motor and looked about her; “but come, we must see everything.”

Theo’s method of seeing everything was somewhat of a surprise to Stephen, for when the door was opened by the caretaker it was Theo who stepped in and took complete possession of her.

“Now, Stephen,” said Theo with authority, “I want you to have a look at the stables and all that kind of thing—because that is your department—while I go over the house with—Mrs.—”

“Pinner, m’lady—Ma’am, and at your service.”

“Very well, Mrs. Pinner, and I suppose you can tell me about everything—but is there any one to go with Mr. Marlowe?”

“Yes, ma’am—m’lady, certingly,” replied Mrs. Pinner with a curtsey; “I was ’er late

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ladyship's 'ousekeeper, and there ain't much that I don't know about this 'ouse, to say nothink of all it contains. Excuse me one minute, ma'am, and I'll fetch my son. 'E'll 'ave the keys of heverythink—the stables, kennels, and the new motor-house; and the 'ead gardener will show the gardens, green-'ouses, and all that department, sir."

The old woman bustled off, rattling her keys, and returned in a few minutes with her son, who touched his forehead and begged Stephen to follow him.

"Theo," said Stephen, "I hope you'll find everything to please you, but—"

"You feel that you are being shunted off, don't you, dear? But really you are not; it's the only way—a division of labor, you know. You know more than I do about outside things, and I must be alone with Mrs. Pinner, or I should never get any real idea of the house at all. Just give me my head, dear, and—you'll never regret it. You run along with young Pinner, and I am sure if there is anything you don't know he'll tell you all about it. Now, Mrs. Pinner, upstairs

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first, please; and you have your lists with you?"

Stephen felt himself dismissed, so rather unwillingly he followed Peter Pinner, pretending to know all about stables, but in reality showing a deplorable ignorance, which amused Peter not a little.

Meanwhile Theo proved that she knew her business thoroughly, for she was soon deep in verifying the inventory, counting the number of rooms, asking questions as to the number of servants required, and looking over the linen; so that, when she rejoined Stephen in the garden she startled him by saying that the house was perfectly satisfactory, and advised him to take it without delay.

"It is just what we want," she said decidedly, for she had proved herself the grey mare; "the linen, the plate, everything seems to be in excellent condition, and I have made out a list of things that would have to be got in town—some of the kitchen utensils need replenishing. But I should like to have the house, dear, if you approve of it."

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"Very well, sweetheart," he said meekly, for he realized that resistance would be useless when a woman, and she the woman he loved, had set her heart on anything.

All this comedy was not lost on the gardener, for he recognized the old familiar signs of those who had become recently engaged and were soon to be married, so he smiled covertly, and turned away with a good-natured grin.

"Let us go into the house again, for I want you to see it and tell me you are pleased with my choice. By the time we get through it will be tea-time, and after that I suppose we shall have to think of going back to town. But—I wish we didn't have to go," she added wistfully.

"We'll be back soon, for I'll see the agent to-morrow," promised Stephen, "and then we'll never have to leave until you get tired of it—or me."

"You foolish boy!" cried Theo, as she walked along toward the house by his side. "I believe you're fishing for compliments; but it's no use, for I'm not going to tell you."

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Stephen listened with delight, while Theo explained all the arrangements she proposed making.

"I believe you decided to have me take the house the minute you saw it," suggested he slyly; "now confess, didn't you?"

"I wonder if I did? But I'm really not at all certain that you are right."

They descended the broad staircase to the hall, where a table was spread with bread and butter, jam and toast, and the kettle was already singing.

"There's milk and sugar," she said. "Perhaps you had better help yourself."

When tea was over Theo had a last mysterious interview with Pinner, and then they took their departure homeward. She was very silent on the way back, and Stephen did not dare to interrupt her reverie. Unable at last to bear the silence any longer, he asked her what was the matter. Theo started slightly, but, recovering herself by an effort, replied that it was nothing.

"But you are happy," urged Marlowe uneasily; "you don't regret—"

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“No, I don’t regret; what is there to regret—except that I have been almost too happy—it rather frightens me!”

“And you are superstitious?”

“That all won’t turn out as I hope it will? How foolish you are! Why shouldn’t it?”

CHAPTER XXII

MARTHE WRITES A LETTER

MARTHE TESSIER had left Miss Benner's service because she had been refused her request for an increase in wages. Since the actress' retirement from the stage the maid had found her situation very dull. There was very little beyond the routine work to be done, and besides, she missed the theatre with its life of change and excitement; and, being at times frankly bored, she found it more and more difficult to endure her mistress' vagaries and moods.

After the attempt to force an increase in wages had failed so signally, Marthe put her wits to work to see what her next move should be. Money had proved unavailing in the case of Miss Benner; then why not go back to the fountainhead of supplies and try

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there? Marlowe had been the original paymaster, so why could she not find some means to induce him to part with some of his cash now? He still had money, and why should she not have some of it? It was necessary to think over the situation and see what could be done.

But first a motive. No, not a motive, for that suggested a crime—a reason, an inducement! Marthe was proud of this word. She had played her second best card, but she had not decided to leave Miss Benner's service until she knew where she stood. She was not the one to open the door and step blindly out. She would see if there was anything to step out on, and, more important still, anything to step out for.

If she threw down her trump card, what would be the result? This trump card was none other than a scheme for extorting money from Marlowe. There were, to be sure, two methods she could employ to do this—one to throw herself on his generosity and hope for the best, the other to force the issue by a bolder stroke.

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Marthe was not influenced by moral considerations from deciding upon which course to pursue; she hesitated merely because she could not make up her mind which plan would be the more effective. The question was not, therefore, when she would act, but how she could act to the best advantage.

The dramatic possibilities appealed to her strongly, and the natural impulsiveness of her nature made it easy for her to contemplate this phase as a distinct and alluring solution of the problem. She would only be wasting time by seeing Marlowe and attempting to secure his generous aid to free her from a situation that was fast becoming intolerable. Marlowe, she knew, had had his eyes opened very effectively, since he had arrived in New York some six months ago, and it would not by any means be an easy task to throw sand in his eyes now. He knew too much in these days.

It was a comparatively simple matter to write a letter to Marlowe and send it to the Hotel Ritz, where she had seen by the newspaper he was stopping. Her next move was

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to give Miss Benner warning, and then go to stay with her cousin in Tottenham Court Road for a few days; this latter address she had given in her communication to Marlowe.

The letter was nothing less than an attempt at blackmail, and in it Marthe said among other things that unless the sum of two thousand pounds should be paid to her on or before a certain date, then Mademoiselle Tessier would tell all his friends that the famous actress Louise Benner had been his mistress. He might not care to have this news made public, especially now—and the very simple alternative was to pay over the money without delay.

The girl, being a foreigner, was not familiar with the English law, or else she would not have tried this means of extorting money—she would not have dared; but, knowing nothing of the consequences, she had not hesitated, for the very reason that she was thoroughly conversant with the weaker side of human nature. It never occurred to her that her victim would resist.

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Stephen received Marthe's letter two days before the day set for his marriage. All the arrangements for his wedding had been completed.

His mail was always placed on his breakfast tray in the sitting-room. On this particular morning he came in late. His breakfast looked inviting. He sat down and spread out his napkin. He glanced over the letters; there were only two—one with a foreign stamp, the other with an English one. He threw them aside impatiently. They could wait. He was hungry. He must eat first. He did so, and with keen enjoyment. He lingered over his meal, but at last it came to an end.

The last drop of coffee was drained. He pushed back his chair. He had the air of a man who is satisfied. He sighed contentedly and smiled.

He took up the letter with the foreign stamp. It was from Rome—from Carla James. Ah! what a good woman she was! She understood him so well! He felt decidedly better. After he had read her letter

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through he folded it and placed it on the tray. Then he took up the other letter and examined it curiously. The handwriting was not familiar. Could it be another anonymous letter? With a shrug of his shoulders he re-read its superscription. From whom could it be?

He read it quickly, with an outward appearance of calmness; he deliberately folded it up, then he rose abruptly. He paced the floor several times. He was extremely agitated and uneasy. Marthe's knowledge of human nature had not been at fault.

Suddenly he rang the bell with considerable violence. He requested that his servant be sent to him immediately. The man went out quickly in search of Jenkins, and Marlowe paced the floor more rapidly. He was flushed and angry. The door opened and Jenkins came in. He saw the necessity of pulling himself together.

"I am going to the city; bring me my things."

"Quite so, sir; thank you, sir," answered Jenkins.

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Half an hour later Marlowe alighted from a hansom in Chancery Lane. He made his way to Soames' office. Luckily Soames was alone.

"Mr. Marlowe!" he exclaimed, rising and coming forward.

After relieving his client of his coat and stick, he waved him airily to a seat.

Marlowe removed his hat, placed it on top of his coat, and seated himself.

"Mr. Soames," he said, producing Marthe's letter from his pocket, "I am going to be married the day after to-morrow, and look at that!" He placed the letter before the solicitor. "What am I to do?" he asked anxiously.

Lumley Soames did not answer. He glanced apologetically at Marlowe; then, fixing his gold-rimmed spectacles more firmly on the bridge of his nose, adjusted the black ribbon which held them with extreme care, opened the letter and read it; his lips pursed, his eyes solemn.

"I presume this is true," he ventured at last; "ah! well—that doesn't matter. Will

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you please sit here?" he continued, rising, "and I shall dictate a letter to you. This—person, I suppose—is—er—familiar with your handwriting? Yes? Well—er—are you ready? Then I shall begin. First the address, and then the date."

Marlowe obeyed and looked up inquiringly, wondering what was coming next.

"Dear Madam," dictated Soames, his eyes fixed on Stephen, "I received your letter, and must confess I was vastly surprised at the news it contained. You are perfectly correct in supposing that I do not wish this news to be known. If it is true, it would ruin me just at present. Will you make it convenient to call at my office to-day at a quarter to three o'clock punctually, and I shall give you a cheque—"

"Never!" cried Marlowe, throwing down his pen.

"For two thousand pounds—on condition," continued the solicitor blandly, "that you, in return, agree to sign a paper pledging your immediate departure from England, and your promise never to return

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there, and to relinquish any claims you may have upon me now and forever."

"I will never consent!"

"No?" asked his tormentor calmly; "why not? I should think that you would prefer Miss Tessier to take the consequences, rather than yourself. Trust me, for I shall not let you suffer. Follow my advice, and I promise you that you shall not. Believe me! It is the only way. I know this breed, and—"

"Very well, Mr. Soames; have it your own way," and finishing the letter he signed it viciously.

"You don't understand—of course not," rejoined Lumley Soames. "I quite see that; but come, let's go out to luncheon and I shall tell you what you have to do."

The two men returned an hour later.

"Everything is in readiness," he remarked pleasantly, "even to your visiting card pasted over my name-plate. I shall join the policeman. Don't forget any of the instructions I have given you. That is very important."

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Unless you make a mistake, I don't see how anything can go wrong."

"There's many a slip," quoted Stephen below his breath, as he found himself alone, and at that moment came a knock at the outer door.

"Come in," answered Stephen, and the door opened, admitting a woman dressed in black and heavily veiled. Her companion, Carpenter, closed the door and disappeared behind the screen, opening and closing a door leading into an inner apartment.

The man and woman looked at each other. It was he who first spoke.

"Pray be seated, Miss—Tessier," he said suavely.

"I have come—" she began angrily.

"One minute. You wrote me a very unpleasant note this morning. I felt that this matter should be settled without delay."

"But certainly," replied Marthe, throwing back her veil and looking fixedly at her antagonist.

"I don't mean that," retorted Stephen

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coldly; "I—was referring to the—statement about—myself—that is—being—"

Marthe closed her lips with a decisive snap and Stephen frowned.

"It is a matter of no importance, the truth of what you say—the main point is to close your mouth. You mentioned one way. Is there no other?"

"No, none," she answered firmly, and her eyes never wavered from his.

"But I was kind to you once," persisted Stephen, carrying out Soames' instructions, and wondering whither they were taking him; "do you think it is fair—"

"Ah! I cannot concern myself with motives," exclaimed Marthe impatiently; "I have to think of how I am to live. I need money—you have it; I make you pay."

The eagerness was carefully repressed, but Stephen shivered involuntarily, though, to the eye of Soames, who was furtively watching the scene, the touch was really artistic.

"And the—condition—you agree to that? Otherwise I refuse to pay. I may add that I acknowledge myself a fool to pay any-

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thing, for, if I do, I play into your hands and place myself in your power."

"If I sign that paper, and you pay—you will never see me again!"

"Until the money is spent," suggested Stephen; "and then—"

"No," she shook her head; "for I would be a fool to put my hand into the lion's mouth a second time."

"This thing must be stopped!" said Stephen.

These were the first spontaneous words he had spoken, and she glanced at him sharply. His client was making use of an unstudied effect. Really, he must be careful.

"I am glad you think that way," she said, smiling.

Stephen felt himself standing on the brink of an abyss. There were many things he did not understand. Soames had told him what he must do during the luncheon hour, but somehow he had not been able to grasp the full meaning of it all. The truth was that he had been rather confused, and the only thing that had been at all clear to him

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was the fact that he must pay over money.

As he had just told the girl, the course seemed akin to absolute madness, for it would put him completely in her power; and that he most particularly wished to avoid at all costs. Yet here he was about to do what he had been advised, but that which his better nature and judgment told him was the worst thing possible under the circumstances. He was distinctly in a quandary. His adviser was a solicitor, recommended by his own lawyer at home, and yet he hesitated at following his advice. What could it mean? Could it be that the man was trying to deceive him, and if so to what end? It could not be. The idea was impossible. But the cheque was to be paid. His cheque book, the blue one, in the second left-hand drawer of the desk at which he was sitting!

It was incredible, and yet it was clear. He could not understand it. But there could be no mistake, for Soames had not hesitated to make this business of the cheque book clear. He was forced to trust the solicitor. He had no one else. His own judgment would

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avail him nothing. He must pay! And then what? Well, he would trust to luck, as he had done many times before, and hope to win out.

Was love, happiness, all that made life worth while to be snatched from him, because of a sin that was past?

But Soames had assured him he knew this breed, and that there was no other way. He looked up and met the woman's eyes fastened on his. Her face was pale, but suffused with passion, and her eyes burned into his with an expression of hate. He flashed back anger for anger, as he pulled the drawer out and took up the cheque book. He opened it, and saw red for an instant. He could have killed this fiend as she sat there, expectant, gloating.

He controlled himself, however, and wrote out the cheque,, signed it with a flourish carefully blotted it, and looked up. As he waited in indecision, the woman, taking advantage of the moment, acted. With a quick spring she made a dash forward, striving to seize the cheque; but Marlowe caught her

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wrist, covering the cheque with his other hand. For an instant the two glared at each other. Then, releasing her hand, he pushed her back a step. Still keeping his right hand flat over the cheque, he handed the angry woman a pen, and indicated the paper for her to sign. As if caught in a trap, she stopped for a second, then seized the pen, for she saw that refusal would mean the failure of her plan, and, hastily reading the paper, signed it. Marlowe quickly took it from her, and raised his other hand, uncovering the cheque. With a cry the woman caught it up.

She shrank back in alarm.

Soames, coming forward, confronted her.

“You shall go to prison for this,” he said sternly; “I am a solicitor, and this is my office. You may not know it, but what you have done, or attempted to do, is an indictable offence. Take her in custody—for safe-keeping,” he added to the policeman, who seized her and held her. “I shall attend to her later. And now listen to me, young

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woman! That cheque is not negotiable. Mr. Marlowe, without knowing it, signed one of mine. I purposely arranged that he should mistake the two books. He has no account at that bank. He acted by advice of counsel. You have made certain incriminating remarks before witnesses, and you are clearly guilty. Mr. Marlowe holds a paper in which, over your signature, it is stated by you that you are paid in full by him, and that you promise to leave England—”

“Stop! I’ve had enough of this,” cried Marlowe; “you,” to Soames, “must settle this matter as you see fit. I leave it in your hands. Now take her away!”

At these words Marthe, white with fury, broke away from the policeman, who had relaxed his vigilance momentarily, and, advancing toward Marlowe, stood before him.

“Thank you for—nothing,” she said, her voice trembling, and then, before any one could guess what she was about to do, tore up the cheque into small bits and threw the pieces of paper in his face. Then she laughed

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and turning away held out her hands to the policeman with an appealing smile.

“You would not like your—Theo to know of this!” she said tauntingly.

CHAPTER XXIII

STEPHEN MISSES A VISITOR

IT was a great relief to Stephen to get a thoroughly satisfactory letter from Soames the next morning. It came about mid-day, and said that Marthe, after a night in prison had been really frightened, and, being convinced that she had been unwise in acting so hastily, had consented to go to the boat under the care of Carpenter. He it was who took her home, and then saw that she reached France. By Soames' advice, he had given her fifty pounds, and the sum, not being exorbitant, Mr. Marlowe might consider himself well rid of the woman, with little possibility of being troubled by her in the future.

Stephen drew a long breath of relief. The previous day had been a trying one, but, strange to relate, he had slept well and

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awoke refreshed. This welcome news had cheered him and made him feel that life was indeed worth living. He wondered what Theo was doing, and whether she realized it was the day before their wedding! It was too wonderful. It was almost incomprehensible.

He had had a bad scare, but, thank Heaven! that was all over. It had been unpleasant while it lasted, but now, as he looked back on it, he forgot the seriousness of it.

He no longer felt worried, either, for the storm-clouds had rolled away, and the sun was shining.

To-morrow they would be one. To-morrow they would meet to part no more, until one should be taken and the other left. To-morrow! Would that morning never dawn? Would the present day never die? The minutes dragged along. The hours were leaden and were centuries in passing! It would be twenty-four hours before he could see his beloved Theo again; a thousand æons, it seemed to him.

He looked across at the clock on the man-

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telpiece. It was almost time for luncheon, and he was glad, not because he was hungry, but because it made a break in the day! the interminable day!

He took a few turns up and down the room. He must plan what he would do. It would never do to sit in his rooms for the rest of the day. He would go mad. He could not see his fiancée to-day. he had told him not to come. She would be too busy to see him. There were a thousand and one things she had to attend to, things that invariably had to be put off until the very last moment. She had to give final directions about the packing, and here Stephen glanced sharply at the written page. Theo informed him she had heard from her old nurse she was dying, and in her letter she had inclosed her birth certificate, showing that she was the daughter of Alida and James Mason.

His trunks were already packed and strapped, with the exception of his dressing-case, and the last things that could not be finished until the morning. There was

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nothing to do indoors, absolutely nothing. He would go out and lunch at some quiet restaurant, take a walk or drive afterward, and then return for tea. That would be the best plan. It would change the current of his thoughts and refresh him. This resolution once taken, he opened the door into his bedroom, where Jenkins was engaged in fastening his hold-all together.

"I shall be back for tea at five," he said; "get my things now. I am going out."

"Straight away, sir," replied the valet; and a few minutes later his master took his departure.

Jenkins returned to his duties with a quizzical smile on his face. He examined the dressing-case, which had been done up, critically.

"Gold mountings! My eye!" he exclaimed, with a sigh of reminiscent regret, "we are getting on a bit; a proper job they made of it—couldn't have done it better myself."

He blew a little speck of dust from one of the bottles, and replaced it in the case.

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“Wonder how he’ll like married life,” he went on, as he moved about the room and finally stopped before an open trunk; “a mite different from the old days, I take it!” He examined and calculated the space left in the trunk. He had some articles to put in in the morning.

“The suit he’s wearing can go there—and that corner for the clothes-bag. My gentleman will be happy with his lady. She was good-looking and pleasant-spoken, too, the twice I saw her. Not but what I won’t be thinking it’s better for him and his money to have a wife; they’re not so much on the lookout for what’s what.”

“We’ll settle down in a house—in the country,” he thought, as he folded a pair of trousers and placed them in the trunk, “and I’ll have more to do, more’s the pity; valet to a married man’ll be different from doing for him when he was single. Not that I’m complaining—only it won’t be the—same! No hotels—no fun, and all ship-shape—just family life. Well, it’ll be a change, and the maids may be sociable. A change is a good

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thing, time in and time out, though, and perhaps I'll be able to put up with it. There's no knowing. I ain't denying that I won't miss that Sarah, Lady Elphinstone's maid—with her black eyes and her tantalizing ways. But no—marriage ain't for me. It wouldn't suit my arrangements."

Jenkins closed the trunk with a bang, as if to emphasize his remarks, and went into the sitting-room to see what time it was, for it was one of Marlowe's peculiarities that he would not have a clock in his bedroom, as he said he was not accustomed to the noise it made, and it always kept him awake. He had a watch by his bed, so that if he waked during the night he could easily look at it. In the daytime it was very little trouble to walk into the other room. Other people could do as they pleased, but this was his way.

Jenkins looked at the clock. It was five minutes to three. He had nothing to do, and as Mr. Marlowe would not be in until five o'clock, he might as well go out and get a breath of fresh air.

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He went into the other room to see if everything was in order, and, being satisfied that it was, locked the inner door, and returned to the sitting-room, intending to go out that way.

Before leaving, Jenkins straightened out the papers on the desk, changed the position of a chair, poked the coal fire to make it burn more brightly, and slowly made his way across to the door leading to the hall, looking about him as he did so, to see that all was as Mr. Marlowe liked it.

Absent-mindedly his hand felt for the handle of the door; but before he touched the metal knob, a knock from without made him start back suddenly. His hand dropped to his side. He was startled. Realizing that he must answer the summons, he stepped forward and opened the door. He could not imagine who it might be. A woman in a black bonnet, heavily veiled, and wearing a large cloak, stood before him.

Before he could anticipate her intention, she had walked past him, and stopped in the middle of the floor.

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"I wish to see Mr. Marlowe," she said, in a queer, strained sort of voice; "they told me he was in. I am his—sister."

Jenkins did not answer. Indeed, he turned aside and closed the door. He was ready and able to deal with the situation. He came forward.

"Quite so, madam; but he was not expecting you until to-morrow."

Louise Benner moved to the mantel-piece and rested her arm on it. She was taken aback by the servant's words, uttered so glibly, and felt the need of something solid to lean on.

She had recognized the man at once, when she came in, but that he had evidently not the slightest idea who she was had been a relief, until the capping of her falsehood with another equally daring, made her uneasy, and suddenly she felt herself trembling slightly. The contact with the hard surface brought back her courage, but she realized the necessity of being on her guard.

She had learnt of Marlowe's whereabouts from Marthe, who, though they had parted

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on very indifferent terms, wrote to inform her that she was leaving England indefinitely. It was the postscript which had told her that her former lover was domiciled at the Ritz, a piece of news that was exceedingly welcome to her, and for which she was grateful, as he was the one person in the world whom she was extremely anxious to see at the present time.

What she could not understand was the reason why Marthe had told her the present address of a man who she was so particularly desirous of meeting, for she certainly owed her mistress nothing.

"Did he say to-morrow?" she inquired, as if irritated; that was unkind of him."

Jenkins maintained a discreet silence, waiting with characteristic patience for the further development of the object of this woman's visit. He preferred to treat the lady as decidedly objectionable, until he was more sure of the part she was to play in the affairs of his master, who, at such an important crisis as the eve of his marriage, must and should be protected.

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"As I am here," she said, holding up a neat foot to the blaze, and speaking very casually, "I might as well remain until he comes—I suppose he will not be long now?"

Jenkins coughed apologetically.

"I am sorry to say," he said, still coughing, but more faintly, "that he has gone for the—day, and will not return until—tomorrow!" His manner remained unchanged. He appeared to be waiting for her to speak.

She thought over the situation for a few seconds. She looked at the man. His attitude had not altered. Suddenly she became aware that she had no mean antagonist to deal with. Like most English servants, he was faithful to his master's interests, and would defend him to the last moment.

But she must see Marlowe. Yes, she would wait, and having made up her mind to this, she drew a chair and sat down.

Jenkins saw that it was twenty-five minutes to four. There was nothing to do; he could not turn her out bodily. Diplomacy was the only way.

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"Is there anything else you would be wishing to say?" he said gently, "as I have some work to do."

"No, I am very comfortable here. If I need anything I will call."

The cool impertinent tone in which these last words were spoken, amused Jenkins instead of annoying him. He walked back into the bedroom once more; though he was extremely careful to leave the communicating door wide open.

Louise stared into the fire. A woman who has a definite object to carry out does not put down her head and try to rush it through. A man, on the other hand, is like a bull; he only knows he wants a thing, and being unable to brook opposition, carries the situation by storm.

By and by, Louise began to look about her slowly. She tried to catch the slightest sound. She raised her veil and looked carefully about her. After a moment she rose languidly, and stood by the mantelpiece, her head held stiffly, the chin raised, and the eyes half closed. She heard Jenkins in the other

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room. What was he doing? If she could only get a peep into that room without being noticed. She advanced noiselessly to the centre of the sitting-room, and paused. She dropped her veil and smiled behind it.

She moved forward a few steps. She could just see into the bedroom. A few more steps and, at last, she could see the servant bending over what looked like a dressing-bag. What could it mean? Was Stephen going away? Had she come too late? No, the man had said he might not be coming back until to-morrow. There was no time to be lost. If he were not coming back until to-morrow, she must write to him. If he came back—he would see it, and then what?

It was a gamble, but it was worth risking. She walked to the window and looked out. She threw a casual glance toward the bedroom. She drew a sheet of paper to her, and began to write rapidly. The address was written in a rather shaky hand, but as she

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started on the note itself she grew calmer, and wrote more legibly.

Five minutes later she got up and, with her veil once more drawn down, stood at the window. She heard a noise from the bedroom. Louisa did not move. Jenkins appeared in the doorway. He came in and looked at the clock. It was quarter past four. He re-entered the bedroom, and in a few minutes returned with the dressing-case in his hand.

At the same moment Miss Benner moved across the room and installed herself in the chair by the fire. Her reverie had come to an end. Louisa looked up and met the eyes of the servant fixed upon her.

"Mr. Marlowe will not be here to-day," he said, "if he was coming, he would have been here by four."

"I don't understand—" she began uneasily.

Louisa rose slowly to her feet. She tried to read his expression. It was impassive, and she could learn nothing. She could not

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prolong the silence forever. She realized her helplessness. She must trust to the letter. She bowed her head and, turning, walked toward the door. Jenkins opened it for her. Without looking at him again, she passed out. The man returned for the bag, and Louisa paused just long enough to see him quickly walk down the corridor; then she made her way to the left.

Five minutes later the servant returned, unlocked the door of the sitting-room, placed the bag in the bedroom, and rang for the waiter. After tea was ordered, the valet unpacked the dressing--case, and, when the tray was brought and placed on a small table by the fire, he and the waiter went out.

At five minutes to five Marlowe came in and closed the door.

He made tea, and after he had drunk it, rose and lit a cigarette. He thought of Theo, and suddenly he felt that he must write her a line—just a line to tell her he was thinking of her. . . . He walked over to the desk. Two letters lay there. He took up one of them and read:

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“DEAR STEPHEN:

“I am dying, but before the end comes, I must tell you the truth. I cannot hold it back any longer, now that death is so near. Your daughter lived with me as my niece, until last year. I falsely accused her of theft, and she left me to go on the stage. I have never seen her since. I am an old woman, and I am dying. I cannot write another letter. Will you do me a favour? If you should ever meet a young lady by the name of Majorie, who was adopted by Mrs. Camp, when she was five years old, give her the inclosed marriage certificate; the other paper is her birth certificate.

“Her mother died when she was born, and the father begged me to take charge of the child. Shortly afterward his mind became unbalanced, and he is still in the asylum, where his case is pronounced hopeless and incurable. Don't fail to tell their daughter all that I have told you, for I know that you often see her.

“Good-bye, and forgive me for the deception I have practiced. I believed I was

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acting for the best. Perhaps it will come all right. I cannot write any more—I am too tired.

“Your old friend,
“ANNE JAMESON,
“whom you knew in the old days as
“ELIZA MANSON.”

Stephen pressed the letter to his lips. Then it *had* been his daughter, after all. And, Majorie—Theo—what a piece of news for her. He placed the letter in his pocket, took up the second envelope, and scanned it. He did not recognize the handwriting. With a quick movement he tore it open, and drew the letter out.

“Dearest Stevie,” he began, and with a strange sinking feeling, he forced himself to go on to the end.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ELEVENTH HOUR

“**P**OOOR girl,” he exclaimed, and sighing, murmured gently the name written at the end of this extraordinary epistle: “Louisa.” The name did not recall pleasant memories, and in his heart he felt ashamed that he had ever had any associations with her at all.

And when he remembered that he understood precisely the conditions under which he accepted Louisa, until he should tire of her, he smiled bitterly, and felt still more ashamed of himself, for had it not been a horrible bargain which he was forced to accept in his ignorance of the world as it is?

There had never been a question of love then. That was not in the bond. But—now at this late day, for Louisa to declare that she loved him. Nonsense. It was not in her nature, as he knew it. Besides, he

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himself was in love now, and that changed the whole world for him.

“Why on earth has she fallen in love with me now? I thought she was absolutely in love with her art, and loved that alone. It was my money she needed, and I gave it to her generously. It has placed her where she wanted to be, but now—well, she must go her way, wherever that may be, and I certainly must follow where love for the first time calls me.”

He tore up the letter, and threw the pieces into the fire. He looked steadily into the very heart of the flames they made, until the last shred was consumed, then, abruptly turned away, with a shrug of his shoulders.

“There, that is over and done with,” he said. “I must think only of my future happiness with my Theo.”

Suddenly a look of sadness overshadowed his face for he remembered that he still had to confess all. There must be nothing but trust between them, and then, ah, what then?

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When, later on, he faced the woman he loved, even then his courage did not fail. He had a duty to perform, and hard as it would be, he would drain his cup of bitterness to the dregs.

“I have something to tell you—something you must hear.”

“Wait,” she interposed quickly, “there is a letter you must read first;” and she held it out to him, with her clear, honest eyes fastened on his.

Her face was white as death, but she waited patiently without flinching while her eyes followed every movement of his. She noticed the change from mere interest to one of dawning horror. She knew that he had come to the end, when he quickly turned aside, and crushed the letter in his clenched fist.

“That woman is a devil—she swore she would say nothing, ah, Marthe, I could kill you, but—Theo, this is cruel. I did not wish you to know this through another. I came here to tell you myself. I felt that no shadow of the past must stand between us.

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That is a closed chapter, dear—but—I am unworthy of you—I—.”

She could not bear to look at him, his face was so full of anguish and suffering, but as he began to speak again, she listened breathlessly, looking up at him, as if imploring him to be brief.

“What I have just told you is an experience, only differing in kind, that comes to almost every man. I came here to confess—all. There is more, and—will you listen to me?”

Theo listened to his recital with hands tightly clenched in her lap. She kept her eyes averted, because she knew that Stephen was making an effort, probably the greatest effort of his life, to bring his story to an end before his courage failed him.

He told her the history of his life, omitting neither faults nor failures, and when at last he ceased speaking, she did not move, for fear there might still be more to come.

He placed a letter in her lap, and she looked up at her lover as if startled. “I wish you to read that letter,” he said quietly;

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“it contains two pieces of news—that may interest you—the latter especially.

She opened the letter and read it through. “It was your daughter, then, after all, she said, her eyes still on the written page. “I am so sorry, but you did all you could. I cannot tell you how glad I am to know who I am.”

She looked up to where Stephen had been standing, but he had moved to the door, and paused there dejectedly, with his hand on the knob. As she looked in his direction, he opened the door.

“I am not worthy of you,” he said in a broken voice; “I must go.”

Theo dropped the papers, and rushed into his arms.

“You shall not go,” she cried passionately, “for I love you, I love you.”

As he held her closely to him, the look of wonder in his face, fairly transfigured him. Then he said slowly: “My darling, I have indeed found my happiness at the eleventh hour.”

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